

## **Part 5: Aesthetics of New Small Films**



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## 16. De-centered subversion: *Hukkle* and the challenging of revisionist historiography

**Abstract:** This chapter explores how Hungarian filmmaker György Pálfi, in his debut feature film *Hukkle* (2002), challenges restorative nostalgia in post-communist Hungary. Through the film's penetrative and, at times, subterranean cinematography, Pálfi creates a visual metaphor inviting his audience to look beyond the surface of the film's ostensibly idyllic rural imagery to reveal a more disagreeable reality that lies beneath this façade. I argue that *Hukkle*'s aesthetic constitution serves as a metaphor used to confront post-communist nostalgia, suggesting a need to challenge the rose-tinted myths of collective memory and engage with the darker issues of the past that underlie the more palatable and socially agreeable renderings of history that have come to dominate contemporary historical discourse in Hungary.

**Keywords:** *Hukkle*, Pálfi, Hungary, post-communism, history, memory, political myths, restorative nostalgia

In his winning proposal for the design of Budapest's Memento Park (*Szoborpark*)<sup>1</sup>, Hungarian architect Ákos Eleőd stated that: "Every violent form of society formalises the need and the right to reanalyse, touch up and appropriate their own past in order to shine favourable light on the 'historical necessity' of their regime. Democracy is the only regime which is capable of looking back to its past, with all its mistakes and wrong turns, with its head up"<sup>2</sup>. Eleőd speaks of the potential for objective historical dialogue that democracy accorded Hungary following transition. Yet, despite the renewed possibility for unbiased public discourse, history in post-communist Hungary has been a highly divisive area of contemporary society, party to various political and social manipulations with political myths propagating over honest dialogue and genuine efforts to come to terms with the traumas of recent memory. The reasons for this are manifold; however, it is not my intention to address these matters here. Instead, my interests lie in the ways in which

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- 1 Memento Park is an outdoor museum housing communist-era public sculptures and monuments. The museum is situated on the outskirts of the Hungarian capital.
  - 2 Quoted in Ákos Réthly, *In the Shadow of Stalin's Boots: Visitor's Guide to Memento Park* (Budapest: Private Planet Books, 2010), p. 6.

György Pálfi's debut feature *Hukkle* (2002) scrutinizes history, myth and collective memory in contemporary Hungary. In this chapter, I propose to examine how the film confronts revisionist historiography in post-communist Hungary, history built upon therapeutic values operating in response to the hardships of transition and the disillusionment of life under the new political and economic systems.

Since its release, *Hukkle* has perplexed many who have sought to categorize it. The film has been described as at once an ethnography, a nature documentary, a dark comedy and a detective thriller<sup>3</sup>. Told using minimal dialogue, amplified audio and probing cinematography, the film explores a remote Hungarian village which, at the outset, appears idyllic; cinematographer Gergely Pohárnok captures this seemingly bucolic environment in penetrative detail, capturing the unseen and unheeded lives of the flora and fauna that initially appear to live in symbiosis with the human village dwellers. However, as the film progresses we find that a series of ominous murders have been taking place. Among the collection of meticulously detailed rural imagery, it emerges that the womenfolk are systematically poisoning their spouses and kin. A local detective investigates, but despite closing in on the truth, he is ultimately unable to put a stop to the women's horrific deeds. At the film's conclusion, the only men that remain in the village are bachelors, and the final scene takes place at a wedding, suggesting that another victim has been ensnared.

Despite *Hukkle's* contemporary setting, the film is based upon actual historic events that took place during the 1920s in the Tiszazug region of the Great Hungarian Plains (*Alföld*). It was revealed that for over a decade women had been poisoning both babies and elderly men deemed to no longer have any practical worth to the community. As the police learned of what had transpired and the women went to trial, their misdeeds were stifled from the public sphere. The

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3 Congruously, the film evokes comparisons to a wide variety of international films. *Hukkle* exhibits the intricately elaborate aesthetics of French filmmaker, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, as seen in films such as *Delicatessen* (Jeunet and Marc Caro, 1991) and *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain/Amélie* (2001). The film's documentary approach and vignette style depiction of the daily lives of a small insular community is reminiscent of Ermanno Olmi's *Lalbero degli zoccoli/The Tree of the Wooden Clogs* (1978). The emphasis placed upon the local flora and fauna recalls Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennau's documentary, *Microcosmos: Le peuple de l'herbe/Microcosmos: The Grass People* (1996). *Hukkle* also shares the ambiguous suggestion of murder akin to Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) and even incorporates stylistic parallels to Dziga Vertov's *Chelovek s kino-apparatom/Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).

courts treated the incidents as distinct, unconnected cases, and in many instances trials were delayed by years to downplay the enormity of the crimes<sup>4</sup>.

By rendering this suppressed historical episode cinematically, Hungarian film scholar György Kalmár suggests that *Hukkle* “fills the void left by the silences of official history.” In concordance with Kalmár, I argue that *Hukkle* may indeed be examined through the discourse of counter memory. However, I would also suggest that the film simultaneously focuses upon surrogate historical memories. I argue that *Hukkle* examines the constructed nature of post-communist historical remembrance and does so by utilizing the discourse of intercultural cinema. Laura U. Marks in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000) states that: “[a]s in many intercultural films and videos, the act of excavation performed by these works is primarily deconstructive, for it is necessary to dismantle the colonial histories that frame minority stories before those stories can be told in their own terms”<sup>5</sup>. In view of Marks’ analysis, I claim that *Hukkle* deconstructs therapeutic forms of historical memory, memory operating in response to post-communist fragmentation, renewed fears surrounding national death (*nemzethalál*) resulting from the rising prominence of global supranationalism and the continued search for an agreeable form of national identity following the collapse of communism.

*Hukkle* presents the act of deconstruction metaphorically, through the representation of the rural. From the outset, village life is presented as idyllic. However, over the course of the film, Pálfi destabilizes this romanticized image, slowly accentuating the dark secrets that lurk beneath the surface of the film’s ostensibly bucolic pastoral setting. In doing so, I argue that *Hukkle* symbolically challenges common conceptions of national history in post-communist Hungary. By depicting an overly sentimentalized vision of rural life, *Hukkle* symbolically transforms the rural into a site of restorative nostalgia, to use Svetlana Boym’s term.

Boym argues that restorative forms of nostalgia emphasize a return to origins, “to a prelapsarian moment”<sup>6</sup>. Restorative nostalgics seek to reconstruct a lost – and often mythicized – homeland and do so by glorifying restored and/or invented traditions. Boym claims that restorative nostalgia frequently lies at the heart of

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4 See Bodó (2002) and Kalmár (2013) for further details.

5 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 25. While *Hukkle* does not necessarily focus upon a colonial history, the film’s challenge to dominant forms of historical memory nevertheless draws parallels to the motivations of intercultural filmmakers.

6 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 49.

nationalist discourse and this is no more evident than in the politics of Hungarian populist István Csurka. Csurka has “claim[ed] to fight for the preservation of the Hungarian soul against the soiling influence of Western symbols and values”<sup>7</sup>, drawing upon pre-communist populist/urban cleavages and resurrecting the discourse of the populist writers (*népi írok*) of the inter-war period. Indeed, Csurka has repeatedly positioned Hungary’s urban centers as sites of anti-Hungarian cosmopolitanism, declaring the essence of the Hungarian soul to instead lie in the nation’s rural heritage and the traditions of its peasantry. Consequently, post-communist Hungary has witnessed a romantic revival of peasant culture and *völkisch* traditionalism<sup>8</sup>. I argue that *Hukkle*’s Arcadian representation of rural Hungary draws on these contemporary trends, transforming the landscape into an evocative site of collective memory and nostalgia.

Indeed, the film’s opening firmly establishes the countryside as a highly romanticized site of nostalgia. Following the surfacing of the snake that opens the film, the viewer is presented with an establishing shot of the village<sup>9</sup>. Quaint white cottages sporadically dot the lush green valley as the surrounding hills cast long shadows. We hear birds singing and dogs barking and, rather curiously, the echoed sound of a man hiccupping. The hiccupping man (Ferenc Bandi) is soon made known to us as he fills a jug with milk and takes a seat outside his house where he proceeds to watch the world go by. As his hiccups continue, the image cuts to a close-up shot of ants scurrying around the bench on which he sits, which creaks and tilts with every hiccup. A goose stretches its head through a fence to reach food; a cat yawns and stretches while idly grooming itself; a cricket leaps at the sound of the man’s hiccups; a boy herds goats from his bicycle while another cyclist passes; the amplified audio accentuating the sound of rusty chains. A horse and cart rides by the hiccupping man, the coachman asleep at the helm; sheep nonchalantly graze in the field while a young shepherd sits under a tree with her dog and listens to her personal stereo. A ladybird lands on her chest and walks up the wire of her headphones as she basks in the sun. She gathers it in her hand and closely examines it as it crawls over her fingers. An elderly woman picks flowers, singing to herself under the observation of a rabbit and later a stalk. The stalk then takes flight and the image cuts to an aerial shot of the village and the surrounding

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7 Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism and the Myth in Post-Communist Europe* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 84.

8 See Hockenos (1993), Némedi (1995) and Kiss (2002) for more detailed insight into the romanticizing of the peasantry in Hungarian ideology.

9 *Hukkle* was shot in the village of Ozora, situated in the north of Tolna County.

fields. Such idyllic rural imagery continues throughout the film and establishes a sense of Arcadia akin to that disseminated in Golden Age mythology.

Village life is presented as a natural and organic way of living, a place of simple virtues, tranquility and plenitude. The repeated shots of nature alongside those of the village dwellers suggest a harmonious relationship between man and beast. The film's emphasis on the local wildlife also bestows upon the film an Edenic quality. Animals have been recurrent symbols in the representation of the Garden of Eden as a means of suggesting both the abundance of the land bequeathed to man by God as well as a sense of harmony. This is evident in the work of artists such as Jan Brueghel whose *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man* (1613) foregrounds various animals, placing predator and prey side by side, as a vision of paradise. Pálfi's repeated emphasis on the local flora and fauna, likewise, presents a utopian vision of village life.

Thus, the opening sequences present an image of the rural congruous to that celebrated and elevated in revisionist histories and restorative myth; that of a Golden Age, an Eden. However, having established such a vision of rural life, Pálfi then proceeds to destabilize it. Destabilization is achieved through the discourse of intercultural counter cinema. Laura U. Marks suggests that minor cinema, that is, cinema wishing to both challenge and expand the limits of established and accepted historical discourse, must do so within the parameters of the prevailing discourse it wishes to challenge<sup>10</sup>. She asserts that “[d]iscourses are not only restrictive but enabling. While they limit what can be said, they also provide the only language in which to say it. In order to find expression, emerging thoughts and things must speak in the terms of the discourses that are established, though at the same time they break away from them”<sup>11</sup>.

Dominant cultural, political and historical discourses are often alluded to cinematically through dominant filmmaking practices, codes of representation built around classical narrative cinema. Peter Wollen in his 1972 essay *Godard and Counter-Cinema* states that this classical style can be categorized by narrative transitivity, whereby the narrative flows progressively; identification, either with a central character or characters; transparency of cinematic techniques; a single diegesis, that is to say, an individual world in which time and space follow logical, unbroken sequencing; closure and pleasure. *Huckle*, in accordance with Marks, utilizes the established language of genre cinema. The film incorporates

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10 Minor cinema incorporates diasporic, intercultural, colonized, postcolonial, neo-colonial filmmakers as well as other marginalized groups/individuals striving to broaden the scope of established historical discourse.

11 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 28.

traditional components from the thriller genre in which “[t]he viewers are motivated by narrative suspense to figure out why the murders occur and how the film will end”<sup>12</sup>. However, as David Martin-Jones suggests of minority cinema, *Hukkle* “takes a major cinematic voice and makes a minor use of it, making it stutter or stammer”<sup>13</sup>.

The process of making minor use of a major cinematic voice in *Hukkle* is achieved through the de-centering of narrative. The film’s central mariticial narrative is far from explicit and, throughout, narrative elements are shrouded under the surface of the traditional imagery of country life, described by Anikó Imre as “aesthetic distractions”<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, György Kalmár states: “[i]t takes time till one realizes that there is a narrative, or at least there can be a narrative, established among the various pictures of plants, animals, inanimate objects and people”<sup>15</sup>. *Hukkle*, while adhering to the logic of cause-and-effect narrative structuring, eschews narrative linearity. The digressive rural imagery utilized throughout the film serves to retard narrative progression and render narrative connectivity indistinct.

Furthermore, scenes of narrative significance blend seamlessly into the juxtaposing rural imagery in such a way that narrative development becomes unclear. The scene in which the midwife (Mrs. József Rácz) picks lilies provides a fitting example. This scene, removed from the narrative, appears to present a very romantic image of the countryside. The midwife sings to herself as she leisurely picks lilies; the sky is blue, birds sing, crickets chirp and bees buzz as the camera slowly roams around the field to reveal a passing stork, which then takes flight. Preceding this scene, we see time-lapsed shots of the lilies growing. Initially, the hastened growth of the lilies appears to provide further evidence in support of the theory that *Hukkle* presents village life as Edenic, in that the land appears as if to be yielding of itself. However, it is only in light of later scenes that the significance of the lilies is made apparent. In subsequent scenes, the midwife is seen decanting an ominous white liquid into small bottles and, later still, we observe her distributing them among the womenfolk on the production line of a clothing factory. Following this, we see several different women adding the mysterious liquid to

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12 Anikó Imre, *Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2009), p. 217.

13 David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity: Narrative Time in National Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 36.

14 Imre, *Identity Games*, p. 203.

15 György Kalmár, “Body Memories, Body Cinema: The Politics of Multi-Sensual Counter-Memory in György Pálfi’s *Hukkle*,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, Vol. 55 (2013), 13 May 2014, <http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/kalmarHukkle/index.html>.

food, which is then served to their husbands who, shortly thereafter, die. Thus, despite *Hukkle*'s lack of explicit narrative statements, it may be inferred that the poison used to systematically kill off the village's male population has its roots in the lilies picked by the midwife.

The film also de-centers narrative through characterization. Classical narrative cinema traditionally utilizes character motivations as a means of advancing the plot. *Hukkle*, alternatively, complicates such notions by lacking a central character who we follow in pursuit of their goals. The one character who may perhaps be identified as the film's central protagonist is the hiccupping man who features recurrently throughout the narrative and whose hiccups serve as the motivation for the film's title<sup>16</sup>. However, he is conspicuous in his lack of action and for the film's duration he sits and observes the world as it passes him by<sup>17</sup>. Additionally, *Hukkle*'s more active characters, the women who poison their kin do so without emotion, show neither remorse nor concern of reprisal, their murderous deeds are carried out with the same nonchalance as their daily chores and tasks. Consequently, the audience is denied any real emotional engagement. Estrangement is furthered by the lack of dialogue, which restricts subjectivity and, as such, we learn nothing of the women's motivations.

Thus, while utilizing dominant genre conventions, *Hukkle* positions itself in opposition to the dominant language of cinematic narration that, as Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer suggest, "train[s] those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality"<sup>18</sup>. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that classical narrative cinema, cinema based around immersion and character identification, ultimately reduces the spectator to a state of passivity by nullifying individual imagination and spontaneity. *Hukkle* instead encourages active spectatorship; the film's complex narrative structure necessitates attentive participation on the part of the spectator who is encouraged to piece together its dislocated narrative strands into a cohesive whole<sup>19</sup>. Through the film's de-centered narrative configuration, Pálfi

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16 *Hukkle* is an onomatopoeic word.

17 The man's hiccups serve as a means of connecting the film's divergent narrative strands, localizing them to a centralized focal point.

18 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 100.

19 Pálfi himself declared that "the film is an experimental movie that respects the audience.... The film is a game too, and I think, if somebody likes to play, he or she will like my film too. This is not a weird film for me; it only uses a different storytelling system." Anthony Kaufman, "György Pálfi's "Hukkle," the Hungarian Hiccup Heard

encourages his audience to attentively scrutinize the film's representation of rural Hungary to reveal the true horrors of the film's mariticial narrative.

By utilizing a mode of representation that advocates critical spectatorship, *Hukkle* shares the political motivations of Bertolt Brecht's epic theater. In accordance with the Brechtian alienation effect, a theatrical concept that seeks to heighten its audience's perception of the constructed nature of social reality through the artificiality of the theater, *Hukkle* seeks to emphasize the devised nature of revisionist historiography within post-communist Hungary. Analogous to Brecht's notion of epic theater, Pálfi employs methods of distancing via the film's disjointed narrative and refusal of affective character identification to induce a social and political response from its audience. In doing so, *Hukkle* encourages its audience to question more than just the rose-tinted representation of village life, the film guides the spectator toward wider social and political contemplation.

It is through *Hukkle*'s formal arrangement that the audience is encouraged to question the idyllic representation of the rural that the film establishes from its outset. As György Kalmár rightly observes “[m]edium shots – which follow the heritage of Renaissance portrait-painting, framing the person's upper body, staging the human figure as central focus-point of artistic representation – are conspicuously rare in this film”<sup>20</sup>. Kalmár suggests that the film's deviation from traditional cinematic language positions *Hukkle* as a cinematic counter memory and, indeed, this is a valid argument. I would further this claim by suggesting that *Hukkle*'s formal language provides the spectator with a perspective through which to scrutinize the ostensibly Edenic images presented. The film's magnified visual style, predominantly made up of close-up imagery and amplified audio, functions as symbolic device that foregrounds active cinematic engagement on the part of the audience. Through heightened cinematography and audio, *Hukkle* accentuates the seemingly banal, drawing attention to that which would otherwise go unheeded and in doing so directs the audience to consider the film's more intimate details<sup>21</sup>. The probing, close-up imagery provides a means of looking beyond the surface, a form of observation that transcends the superficially idyllic vision of village life to unveil its true nature.

Indeed, the film opens with a sequence literally taken from a perspective underneath the surface. Before we are introduced to the village, we are presented with an extreme close-up shot of a snake. The image does not focus upon its head but

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Around the World,” *Indiewire* (2003), 13 January 2016, [http://www.indiewire.com/article/gyrgy\\_plfis\\_hukkle\\_the\\_hungarian\\_hiccup\\_heard\\_around\\_the\\_world](http://www.indiewire.com/article/gyrgy_plfis_hukkle_the_hungarian_hiccup_heard_around_the_world).

20 Kalmár, “Body Memories, Body Cinema.”

21 *Hukkle* was the first Hungarian film to utilize a Dolby Digital Soundtrack.

instead an indeterminate section of its body. The chiaroscuro lighting suggests that the image is taken below the surface as natural light flickers from above, drawing attention to the texture of the snake's scales. After a few seconds, the snake begins to unfurl, the amplified audio further emphasizing this motion. The image cuts to several similar close-up shots taken from indistinct sections of the snake's body. These shots serve to give priority to smaller details that would be lost through more traditional framing. Only then do we see the snake's head as it emerges from the rocks. It can be argued that the snake, like the serpent whose deception ultimately cast Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, serves to disrupt the illusionary Eden that the film will proceed to portray through the representation of the village. However, it is not the snake itself that holds significance but rather the way it is presented. Through the subterranean cinematography utilized in the depiction of the snake, Pálfi creates a visual metaphor in which audiences are encouraged to look beyond the surface of the film's ostensibly paradisiacal vision of village life to reveal the darker realities that these images conceal.

Penetrative perspectives and those taken from positions beneath the surface become a recurring motif throughout the film. It is from a shot in which the camera descends into the water as it follows a piece of bait cast by a fisherman that we are first made aware of the body that lies undetected in the river. Through penetrative motion, the camera breaches the soil to reveal a mole as it tunnels below the earth. We later see the accelerated germination of a lily seed which begins underground and then erupts through the earth to the surface. Yet, perhaps the most conspicuous of these sequences is the scene in which a fisherman returns home with his catch. His wife prepares the fish but only the husband eats. The camera tilts upward from a medium close-up shot of the fisherman's plate and slowly pans around the room, revealing the rest of the family watching the man as he dines. The camera proceeds to tilt downward, reframing the fisherman as he consumes a spoonful of food. During this motion, the shot transforms into an X-ray image of his skull as he chews and swallows. The camera follows the mouthful of swallowed food down his throat to his stomach when the image then transitions to an X-ray photograph on a hospital wall. The repeated use of subterranean and/or penetrative, permeative cinematography reiterates the visual metaphor established at the very beginning of the film, emphasizing the need to look beyond the superficial, surface details that shroud the more disagreeable secrets that the villagers possess. Akin to the political and social philosophy of Brecht's theater, *Hukkle's* visual metaphor holds wider social implications. By encouraging the audience to analyze the film's Arcadian rural imagery through probing cinematography, Pálfi suggests a need to look beyond the rose-tinted

renderings of history prevalent in contemporary society in order to engage more openly with the harsher realities of the past.

In a similar fashion, many of the key scenes that implicate the womenfolk in the murder of their spouses are shrouded and obscured by elements of the *mise-en-scène* or other rural imagery that requires the audience to, again, look beyond surface details. For example, we see a man taking his pig to a nearby farm for it to breed. As the pigs copulate, we see the man and another woman watching the animals mate, the man framed in close-up as he drinks a glass of *pálinka*. The shot cuts to a similar close-up of the woman, her head filling the right side of the frame. The handheld camera conspicuously shifts leftward to a position between the shoulders of both the man and woman and refocuses to capture movement behind a lime green fence. The image cuts to a closer shot that reveals the shadowy figure to be the midwife seen earlier picking lilies. Again, the shot is framed from behind the fence, the shaky, handheld imagery sporadically framed by the unfocused green rails of the fence. Here we see the woman decanting a mysterious chalky liquid into small bottles. What is noteworthy about this sequence is the way in which Pálfi encourages the audience to look beyond the surface detail. Here, we are presented a typical rural scene in which a man takes his pig to stud and the cinematography forces the audience to look beyond it, literally over the shoulders of the man and woman, to reveal vital narrative details that lurk behind the rural imagery, details that pose questions of the film's bucolic representation of rural life.

A further example can be found in the scene in which another elderly resident hosts a dinner for her family. Again, through detailed close-up imagery, the film depicts a traditional scene in which the woman plucks the feathers of a chicken, chops onions and prepares a roux with strudel flour. The scene's emphasis on the rich colors and textures of the food recalls Zoltán Huszárík's *Szinbád/Sinbad* (1971), a classic of Hungarian cinema and significantly a film about nostalgic reflection. The family enjoy their meal as a bottle of Tokaji wine is passed around the table; it is indeed an image that evokes traditional values centered on the family. The old woman does not join them at the dinner table and instead attends to her husband's meal that must be liquidized. She pours the contents of a plate into the food processor but before transferring the pureed food onto her husband's plate the image cuts to a shot taken away from the dinner table from a position outside of a window. The handheld camera shoots through a net curtain as we watch the woman reach into the cupboard through the yellow sunflower patterns of the curtain. The image cuts to a close-up of the cupboard, a zoomed shot taken from the same position outside of the window. The woman takes out a small bottle wrapped in newspaper, a bottle similar to those decanted by the midwife seen in

an earlier sequence. She tips a capful of the liquid into the blender and returns to the table emptying the contents of the food processor onto her husband's plate. Again, the film presents a key narrative moment reticently, cloaking the scene behind elements of *mise-en-scène* that necessitate we look beyond the surface and behind the facade of traditional rural life.

Throughout *Hukkle*, Pálfi continuously undermines the illusion of Arcadia initially presented by encouraging his audience to look beyond the surface of the bucolic rural imagery through the film's probing and penetrative cinematography. In doing so, Pálfi seeks to challenge the dominant discourse of historical remembrance. By destabilizing the Arcadian representation of rural life, *Hukkle* seeks to contest prevalent post-communist historical mythologies built around restorative nostalgia, myths that serve as reactionary and therapeutic responses to what Vladimir Tismaneanu describes as "the sentiments of discontinuity, fragmentation, and overall confusion of the post-communist stage"<sup>22</sup>. *Hukkle* guides its audience toward the realities that underlie the dominant historical myths through its de-centered mariticial narrative, suggesting that underneath the heavily idealized rendering of the past lies a more disturbing reality that needs to be addressed and reconciled.

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22 Tismaneanu, *Fantasies of Salvation*, p. 6.

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## 17. “I don’t know”: Linking past and present, the personal and the nation, and movement in Sterlin Harjo’s *This May be the Last Time*

**Abstract:** A critical conflict for the Native Americans and First Nations people of North America, perhaps the critical conflict, has to do with past wrongs suffered that remain unaddressed. What is more, the trauma born of removal, of the boarding school/residential school era, of the relocation program and Termination Policy in the United States, of nothing less than attempted genocide on both sides of the border between the United States and Canada is exacerbated by the majority societies of the United States and Canada either remaining blind to these inconvenient truths or holding that past events are just that, past, and that natives need to get over what has happened. Native literary, visual, and performing artists counter this way of thinking with words, objects, and images that bring to light stories of loss, of resistance, and of recovery.

For the International Conference in Small Cinemas, I propose to discuss how in the documentary *This May be the Last Time* (2014) Muscogee Creek-Seminole filmmaker Sterlin Harjo brings together personal history, local history, the history of Removal, World War II, the Vietnam War, and congregational line singing in order to articulate connections between past and present and between song and loss in the name of what Gerald Vizenor terms *survivance*. Vizenor argues that survivance counters the narrative of tragic and passive victimry with and through stories that articulate an active presence. One should see *This May be the Last Time*’s through line of movement as signaling just such an active presence, even as that movement, as is true of Harjo’s other films, is connected to death and at least seeming absence. Although not precisely migration, the stories of movement help to link the personal to something larger – let us call it the historical and the cultural – and thus to a critique of the nation, a recognition of connections, and a celebration of adaptability and community.

**Keywords:** Survivance, Removal, Muscogee hymns, Creek history and culture, technologies of communication or communication technologies

*This May be the Last Time* (2014), Muscogee Creek-Seminole filmmaker Sterlin Harjo’s third of four feature-length films and sole documentary to date, opens with a series of aerial shots from an airplane crossing a forested riparian landscape as an off-screen voice recounts arriving at an Alaska village just prior to the funeral

and interment of a young Athabaskan man. As the voice-over continues, the camera cuts to the speaker, Muscogee elder Jimmy Anderson, recalling how he had joined the native community in mourning their loss and asked those gathered at the spot where the man died if it would be okay for him to sing a hymn that his Oklahoma congregation turns to in times such as this one.

The initial sequence is telling, and not simply because it sounds a pan-tribal note of unity stretching from Oklahoma to Alaska, unity inflected, at least in this instance and in Jimmy's mind, with Christianity; the opening also puts before us what might be termed a problem. That is, how do you take what underpins the story the majority society has long told about *indians*,<sup>1</sup> a story that is one of movement leading inexorably to disappearance and death, and reappropriate it in order to tell a life-affirming story of indigenous presence? Harjo's three fiction films work to bury the *indian* while showing the audience that natives are still here. In *Four Sheets to the Wind*, for instance, Frankie Smallhill's body is not in the coffin festooned with parodic *indian* icons created by a well-meaning family friend, his son Cufe having submerged the body in the pond as his father wished, and the closed coffin – containing a watermelon with a smiley face drawn on it as part of the weight added to make the ruse work – reveals that the stereotype is what is to be buried in and with the film and that the joke is on the audience if we were expecting a typical *indian* film.

What holds for the fiction films holds for the documentary as well, as *This May be the Last Time* tells the story of his grandfather's absence and of a style of singing found in Creek and Seminole Christian churches in Oklahoma. Rather than avoiding important past conflicts and with them the pain of loss, on the one hand, or what is for some the controversial question of change and its effect on natives today, on the other, Harjo addresses both as *This May be the Last Time* stitches

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1 Those familiar with native/indigenous studies will recognize the lowercase italicized *indian* as White Earth Anishinaabe Gerald Vizenor's turn of phrase to describe the construction created and perpetuated by that society. Vizenor has for more than fifty years argued that the narratives offered by the dominant society, be it north or south of the 49th Parallel, would have natives be seen, and come to see themselves, as *indians*, the construction created and perpetuated in order to consign natives to the status of victim in a tragic story. Vizenor will have none of it, would ask us to have none of it, for victim and victimry are passive. Other stories, native stories, articulate an active presence and, in doing so, sound a striking and insistent note of resistance. Thus, to deploy one of Vizenor's key terms, these are native stories of *survivance*, stories that voice not simply survival but, as the suffix indicating condition and action signals, resistance, continuance, and endurance. Native stories, then, are "successive and natural estates [that are] an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (*Fugitive Poses* 15).

together personal history, local history, the history of the Removal of Southeastern Nations in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century wars, and congregational line singing in order to articulate connections between past and present and between song and loss – all in the name of *survivance*.

In March 1962, Pete Harjo’s car is found wrecked in the Little River just north of Sasakwa, Oklahoma, having gone off the State Highway 56 bridge spanning the stream. There is no body. The search for Harjo runs for days, involving law enforcement, local divers, and Creek and Seminoles from Sasakwa and the surrounding area. The natives set up camp beside the river and from there go day after day looking for any sign of Pete. Born seventeen years after the accident, Sterlin Harjo grew up hearing the story of his grandfather’s disappearance and the subsequent search “hundreds of times,” and, in his words, “the thing that always stuck out to me about this story was the songs” the people sang as they searched the river and its banks. He recognized those songs, he tells us, because they were the ones he heard and sang in church.

The Muscogee hymns are a response to great, indeed in some ways cataclysmic change. Roughly a third through the film, just after having linked Pete’s absence, his missing body, and the untold or missing story of Muscogee hymns and American music, Harjo is careful to sound a cautionary note about change, saying “For most things in Native communities, change isn’t necessarily a good thing. It can represent loss. Loss of culture and loss of the way things used to be.”<sup>2</sup> However, *This May be the Last Time* shows us that the hymns are both connected to the past and rooted in native cultural practices and the worldview underpinning them. According to Muscogee poet and musician Joy Harjo, the hymns were influenced by the ceremonial songs of the people, just as the church grounds, pictured as often in the film as are church interiors, were influenced by the ceremonial grounds. Early in the film, Joy Harjo tells us that a song is the spirit of something and that it “appears when somebody needs it.” Such was the case during Removal. Nelson Harjo imagines what the forced march was like, the People allowed to stop only when the soldiers’ horses needed rest, sees in his imagination a native woman taken into the bushes by the soldiers, raped as her husband and the rest of the captives within earshot hear the rutting men, hear first her screams and then her sobs. From that, he says, song is born. Another interviewee says “our people pulled

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2 Near the film’s end, Jimmy Anderson will make an explicit return to this issue when he speaks of needing to respond to young natives who ask him about Christianity’s role in the forced removal of their people. Jimmy can only resort to God’s love and forgiveness with his reply, in effect not answering the crucial question. Harjo’s film provides the answer.

a fast one on the missionaries” in particular, and the whites in general, when they adopted Christianity, because the “hymns are all about survival.”

The Muscogee hymns are sung a cappella in what is known as congregational line singing. This lining-out style is found in the Highlands of Scotland, in white churches in Appalachia Kentucky, in African-American churches in Alabama, and in Muscogee Creek and Seminole churches in southeastern Oklahoma. In short, it is a striking example of transmission, adaptation, and hybridity. *This May be the Last Time* would have the audience learn about and understand what musicologist and Muscogee Creek church member Hugh Foley calls “a whole rich story of American music that had never been told.” Joy Harjo links the heretofore missing story of the Muscogee hymns with the missing story of native people: “indigenous people have been written out of the story of America and the story of culture. It’s like its been sitting there all along. It’s right there in the face of American music and yet that story has been disappeared and left out.”

“Sitting” is a curious and I think playful word here, for prior to Removal, Creek life featured movement as the loose confederacy of the nation necessitated that town leaders travel to meet as political need arose. Moreover, trails linking the eighty to ninety towns beside streams that make up the river systems of North Alabama and Georgia facilitated trade, enabled Creek to visit fellow clan members in distant towns, and allowed both individual Creek and whole families to move on paths through the oak-pine forest and along and across streams of the Piedmont region in search of wood, water, and game (Hudson, 2010: 12–14). In short, movement was a central feature of Creek life, personally, socially, economically, and spiritually. It is a central feature of Harjo’s documentary as well. Indeed, the initial sequence of *This May be the Last Time* accentuates movement and perspective with its series of three aerial shots followed by a high long shot of what we take to be a river in Alaska. That river serves to link the opening with a river in Oklahoma and the story that follows.

In the film’s lengthy opening, running some seven minutes and forty seconds from first image to the title shot, Harjo, narrating his film, articulates a specific native view on the Mississippi River – one that resonates with how the film would have us see the Little River in Oklahoma. Over a slow pan of the Mississippi, Harjo says “Thousands died along the way to Indian Territory. Countless people drowned in the Mississippi River.” For the People, the Mississippi is not, then, the route to freedom that Twain offers readers some fifty years later in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for, as Harjo says, “In our songs the people refer to the Mississippi River as the river of death.”

Immediately after the slow panning shot showing us the Mississippi as the narrative tells us how that river figures in Muscogee stories and song, Harjo’s camera offers a shot of Natives on parade in dance regalia announcing their presence and celebrating their identity as the voice-over quietly, even matter-of-factly, proclaims “Through it all the people survived. We rebuilt our tribe in Oklahoma. Our ceremonial way of life came with us. Our traditional religion and songs. Today they are thriving.” Shot accentuates narration, and vice-versa, both by the dance regalia and the multiple generations it contains: adults, children, and elders. The death march, in short, is visually and aurally countered, supplemented by an objective movement shot celebrating *survivance*.

With a four-second shot without any narration of a snake coiled on a gravely shore at very nearly the midpoint of the film, *This May be the Last Time* succinctly articulates its grounding in traditional Creek and Seminole culture and worldview critical to the People’s survival past and present. Their stories tell of the tie-snake lurking in the waters they followed and crossed. If taboos were broken during a journey, the tie-snake could take one down to a watery death. Like the waters themselves, mind you, the tie-snake was not inherently malevolent, and there are stories where it comes to the aid of the people. A creature associated with the chaotic below world, the tie-snake is balanced by the Thunderers of the above world. In short, the shot of the snake asks us to be cognizant of another way of seeing and being in and with the world. In Donald Justice’s words, “Southeastern tribal values descended from Mississippianism privilege complementarity over opposition” (p. 222) and humans in the middle world help to keep the balance both by recognizing and prizing complementarity and by taking care not to transgress taboos.

The shot resonates historically as well as culturally. The Muscogee Creek and other southeastern nations resisted the Dawes Act of 1867, desiring, rather, to continue to think of land and possession as they had before contact and Removal. The Curtis Act of 1898 abolished the court systems of the Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee, and Chickasaw and, critically, forced allotment onto the Creeks over their wishes and the continued refusal of many. For at least the first decade of the twentieth century, a group of Muscogee led by Crazy Snake resisted. The Snake Faction, as they were known, reinstated traditional Muscogee government – an act of defiance against both the Federal Government and the various agreements and concessions made by tribal leaders at the turn of the century. Following an armed standoff in 1901, leaders of the Snake government were captured and pled guilty to seditious conspiracy. Although admonished to cease organizing by the Federal judge who sends them home, the Snakes persisted to meet in traditional town councils. Eight years later, another armed standoff weakened the Snake Faction.

Immediately after the shot of the coiled snake, Harjo's camera offers the audience a shot of a bridge over the Little. Here and throughout the film, shots of bridges are used to accentuate movement and to make connections both within the individual strands of the film and between them. Indeed, this begins five minutes into the film when, after Jimmy Anderson concludes his story of singing in Alaska, a jump cut to a black screen then transitions to a time-lapse image of a bridge as it emerges from darkness into the light of day followed by a shot of drops making radiating circles on the river's surface<sup>3</sup>. Together, these early shots visually situate the documentary in relation to the story that it will show us, obviously, as sight is linked to site, while the time-lapse photography effectively, and again obviously, shows us that *This May Be the Last Time* is to be about time while accentuating the ability of the moving image to capture the passage of time and manipulate it in the service of story. Later, we see a shot of another bridge spanning a river as Harjo's narrative recounts the death march. We are offered day shots of a bridge seen from a moving vehicle, night shots through the windshield as it crosses a bridge over the Little. Two white men who were boys at the time of Pete Harjo's disappearance stand beside the river with a bridge in the immediate background as they recall the search for the body. We see shots of superstructures helping to hold up bridge decks.

When Harjo offers us with no narration an earlier shot of traffic on a road beneath a bridge as the transition between the narrative's articulation of the origins of the Muscogee hymns and where he grew up in Oklahoma on the border between the Muscogee Creek nation and the Seminole nation, the seemingly throwaway image makes clear what the Snakes fought for and what helps to ground the People. "Native land" is written on a pillar of the overpass. Their land supports the People and helps them to connect past and present, to join Western practices such as Christianity and church-going to Muscogee Creek and Seminole ways of knowing and being in the world. The church grounds are modeled on the ceremonial grounds after all, we are told. The film subtly emphasizes the centrality of land to the people and as a ground for their hymns and the appropriation of Christianity when relatively early on after Nelson Harjo tells us that an old Pastor told his congregation that with the hymns "we were waking up god," we see landscape shots at sunrise and dusk with English subtitles as a Muscogee hymn is being sung. Much later, the connection between land and spirituality,

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3 Those radiating circles mark a connection between *This May be the Last Time* and both *Four Sheets to the Wind* and traditional Muscogee and Seminole worldviews (see below the passage on concentric circles and cyclical thinking in this chapter).

and being, is made explicit by pastor Houston Tiger when he says that he turns first not to scripture as he contemplates his sermon, but to the land: “I get my knowledge out in the wilderness. I fast and pray.” Only then is he ready to turn to the *Bible*. This, then, is why *This May be the Last Time* keeps the land before its audience from first to last.

To have the land before us, to have it on our mind, is to redirect our attention not to the heavens (recall the film’s opening aerial sequence), not to the hereafter, but to the here and now and how it came to be as it is. For the Muscogee Creek and Seminoles, for the other nations of the Southeast United States, for so many other native nations, land and loss are linked, of course, and thus it is little wonder that *This May be the Last Time* has America on its mind throughout its course. Indeed, the film gives us an image of the American flag immediately after the first credits end. Shot directly below with the colors barely unfurled, the image initially gives the impression that the flag hangs upside down. Thus, we are asked to recognize an image of a nation in distress. An hour into the film, as Wotko speaks of his tour of duty in Vietnam and the bad things he and his fellow soldiers did there, we get a lap-dissolve sequence from combat to the American flag and back again. Wotko’s story then makes clear why the nation is in distress as it links Vietnam and the history of his people. He talks of feeling sorry for the civilian residents of a village in which Viet Cong were suspected of being: “I just looked at those villages and they were handmade by all the villagers, just like back in the old days in Georgia and Alabama when our people were being moved and them villages being burned.” What may seem the imprecision of Wotko’s phrasing is anything but, as it conflates villages in twentieth-century Vietnam with native villages in nineteenth-century America. In short, the colonialist and imperialist drive, the desire to possess and control, is damning – to both the native and to the Settler Nation.

Harjo entitles his documentary with a portion of the title of his grandma Johnnie Mae’s favorite hymn, “Espoketis Omes Kerreskos,” or “This May be the Last Time, We Don’t Know.” Song and death are again explicitly linked, for Harjo says that they sang the hymn to her as she lay dying, Johnnie Mae tapping along with the rhythm of the song even though she “wasn’t really conscious.” Harjo recognized even as a boy that the song’s rhythm was different from that of the other Muscogee hymns he knew, doubtless, he later learns, because of its roots in African-American slave spirituals. When the hymn is first sung in Muscogee is not recorded, Harjo tells us, but it has not changed since that time in the nineteenth century. Then and now, “Espoketis Omes Kerreskos” stresses group cohesion, one might even say community: “This may be the last time, *we* don’t know” (emphasis

added). Fitting hymn, then, this, as it is sung to his grandmother and, as the film is careful to tell and show us throughout its course, as the people gather together on the banks of the Little River day after day to search for Pete's body. It is only after a traditional healer and seer comes that the body is found.

Very near to the film's end, Harjo says "Anyone you talk to about these songs will say the same thing. They are dying out. There's going to be a day when they're gone." His film is a counter to that somber claim, however, as he continues, "but these songs echo throughout our community. They echo throughout our stories. And as long as we keep telling them, they will always be here. In death, in worship, in sadness, and in joy, encouraging us." Harjo's body of work to date subtly shows us that one location for living elements of Muscogee and Seminole material and symbolic cultural practices, another "here" if you will, are the products of recording and playback technologies, information and communication technologies (ICTs) more generally; photographs; and indeed film itself. His films highlight and call our attention to representation and technologies of communication. For example, a phonograph appears early on in *Four Sheets to the Wind*, a record continuing to turn after the stylus has run through the final groove; with that image, we get a striking reinforcement of the concentric circles we see radiating from Cufe's body as he stands in the pond after submerging his father's body, the circles, a visual reference to Muscogee and Seminole understanding of the world and of the cyclical thinking born of that understanding.<sup>4</sup> From this point of view, the shot of the coiled snake in *This May be the Last Time* does not so much reinforce the image of something about to strike as it reinforces, fittingly, an image of concentricity.

The links between visual representations, still or moving; communication technologies; and culture are readily apparent in the opening sequence of *Barking Water*. The extreme close-up of Irene's eyes followed by a shot revealing that she is looking at photographs signals that we, like her, need to see and, in particular, need to pay attention to representations. As her dying ex-partner Frankie is wheel-chaired out of his room and the hospital by an orderly helping Irene to free him, we get a shot framed to draw our eye to a hanging display of traditional southeastern native dress. This early signifier of what scholars label the Mississippian

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4 The phonograph can be read as an afterimage, or better still a supplement, of the most famous phonograph in film featuring *indians*: *Nanook of the North* (1922). While in Flaherty's film the phonograph remains a mystery to Nanook, even as it reveals to its twentieth-century audience Nanook's innocence/ignorance concerning technology, in Harjo's film the phonograph signals both an awareness of technology and the role it can play in communicating contemporary natives and their culture(s), not the vanishing native of *Nanook*.

Ideological Interaction Sphere (MIIS), that is to say “the cosmosocial matrix through which most of the contemporary tribal nations of Oklahoma are (and other Eastern Woodlands people) are linked,”<sup>5</sup> is telling, surely, and not simply to signify the shared worldview of the Muscogee Creek and Seminole within which the story is rooted. The shot also frames a question: how does one take culture and cultural practices from a fixed and frozen display so that they will resonate, so that they and the People may live. The sequence offers us an answer with a shot the camera stays with after the orderly rolls the wheelchair down the short passage and into Frankie’s room. We see a young woman first standing, then pacing across the hall, and finally sitting down on floor with her back against the wall. She does not speak. She texts.

Here, then, just as early in *Four Sheets to the Wind* with the phonograph and later with photography and throughout *This May be the Last Time* via photographs, cassette recordings, and radio, Harjo highlights representation and the potential and power of technologies of communication. Indeed, *This May be the Last Time* makes clear it is not until Hugh Foley plays a recording he made of hymns he has been singing with other church members that he hears echoes of African-American spirituals and subsequently sets off on a journey through American music to learn more about the hymns and their origins. A National Public Radio (NPR) broadcast on congregational line singing with no mention of the Creek tradition is heard by a Muscogee woman: she contacts Foley, Foley sends a query about the program to Yale scholar Willie Ruff, Ruff calls Foley, and ultimately a second conference is held at Yale in order to include the previously “unknown” part of this singing tradition in America – what at the second conference Ruff terms “these songs of survival.” In short, if recording and playback technologies can reveal what has heretofore been hidden, often in plain sight and sound, then the emphasis on them in the films tacitly reveal that for Sterlin Harjo the moving image will be the vehicle to animate culture and tradition while offering them to the audience.

Contra the narrative of death and dying offered by the dominant society, then, think the vanishing *indian*, think “the only good *indian* ...,” think the “End of the Trail,” Harjo gives his audience stories of death and dying as a part of the effort to bury the *indian* while showing them that natives, in this place the Muscogee and the Seminole people, are still here. We see and hear the hymns being sung, we see and hear young children speaking Muscogee, we are privy to Wotko telling us that he talks to his ancestors as he cares for the cemetery that is part of his

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5 Donald Justice, “Notes Toward a Theory of Anomaly,” *GLQ*, Vol. 16, No. 1–2 (2010), p. 217.

church grounds, and that he knows that they are listening. Like them, we need to listen as the “amen” following the prayer and song at the film’s end is immediately followed by *mvto*, a giving thanks in Muscogee, and then, after a black screen, a joke that accentuates once again recording and playback technologies: Wotko says, “we’ll be signing them CDs next month” as the women who have been singing with him laugh. No laughing matter of course, this, as the pain of all the erasures, partial and total, of all the efforts of the majority society to do away with natives, is countered by the work done by Harjo and so many other Native visual, literary, and performing artists.

*This May be the Last Time* links the discovery of Pete Harjo’s body and the discovery of the important position the Muscogee hymns have in the history of American music. Early on, Harjo tells us that the hymns are the same songs the “ancestors sang on the Trail of Tears.” He has “wondered where they [the songs] came from,” especially given that “they seem always to have been here.” *This May be the Last Time* is, however, not so much about a search for origins as about the end of something: the end of the absence of Pete Harjo’s body, of the absence of the Muscogee hymns in the history of American music, of the stereotypical figure of the *indian* trapped in and by the past. The People survive, they adapt, while remaining rooted in land and worldview. Wotko says he felt sorry for the Vietnamese “caught in the middle of it all,” but Harjo’s film reveals the middle ground need not be a trap. Just as a bridge serves as a middle ground between and connecting two points, traveling across it cognizant of the need for balance, for reciprocity, and respect for the land – fundamental elements of Creek worldview – might well save us all. I don’t know.

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## 18. Post-industrial landscape in the “Silesian cinema”: Between the aesthetic and cultural experience

**Abstract:** An issue discussed in this chapter concerns the movie landscape in terms of its two chosen functions: aesthetic and anthropological ones. The first function originates from the aesthetic tradition and results from the fact of objectification of the picture (image) as a subject of cognition and contemplation, entangled in the sight codes. It assumes stability and distance as a receptive experience. The second one – reading of a landscape according to the anthropological key – is based on the cultural experience that includes activities such as residing (in a place/territory), participation and engagement. It draws attention not to the view of plane itself, but rather to the space depth that can be associated with the issues of geographical environment, cultural representation, topography, and symbolism of a place and locality. In the reflection on this research, the main issue is not treating those functions as an opposition, but rather using the category of landscape to reveal the cultural practices in terms of complex network of relations between subject/environment/agency, which characterise today’s processes of mediation. The subjects of the analysis are the chosen contemporary feature films representing a certain phenomenon of Polish cinematography – “Silesian cinema.” The main purpose of this research is an attempt to find answers to the following questions: how do the pictures produced by “small cinema” express the locality? To what extent do they preserve/overcome the visual conventions and cultural stereotypes? To what extent it is possible to capture in a movie the complex problems resulting from the dynamics of sociocultural transformation of a region – especially contradictory visions of relation to modernity/postmodernity, creation of new economical divisions and tensions between global/local?

**Keywords:** Post-industrial landscape, industrial ruins, regional cinema, cultural medium, aesthetic and cultural experience

Traditional “Silesian cinema,” namely cinema of the 70s and the 80s, which is mostly associated by Polish audience with the names of film directors such as Kazimierz Kutz, Janusz Kidawa, Jan Kidawa-Błoński, Stanisław Jędryka, Zbigniew Chmielewski, regularly presented a manipulative portrayal of industrial landscape, in which a horizon is filled with industrial plants, foundries’ chimneys and hoisting shafts as well as workers’ settlements harmoniously adjoining them. Their spatial arrangement implies a specific type of social relations, recognised

as characteristic one for the Upper Silesia culture. Films such as *Salt of the Black Earth* (1969), *Pearl in the Crown* (1971), *The Beads of One Rosary* (1979) directed by K. Kutz, *The Sinful Life of Franciszek Bula* (1980), *Pretenders from Yesterday's Street* (1986) directed by J. Kidawa, *Closer and Closer* (1982–1986) directed by Z. Chmielewski additionally developed a specific way of creating the connection between landscape and regional identity, in which an implementation of subculture is clearly visible. Such a subculture is formed by the occupational group of miners as a result of which the regional culture of Silesia is presented in those films visually as mostly associated with red little houses, gardens with doves, and black slagheaps, and is mentally connected with rites and mining ethos – strengthened and founded in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century agrarian–industrial culture.

Films, which can be classified as belonging to the newest “Silesian cinema” – I think of pictures created in the course of the last two decades – are characterised by a different attitude to regional space, it is mainly a discourse taken up with stereotypically strengthened image of Silesian landscape that attracts the attention of spectators. Even if cinema evokes traditional iconography, it is usually done with the use of hyperbole strategy, sometimes satire, but most of all with the use of nostalgia, of which the foundation is the awareness of moving away from the former world. The landscape in the film clearly captures the transformation of physical landscape and thorough metamorphosis of local space. The audience can notice not only the presence of industrial structures still in operation and post-industrial waste, relics of the progressing processes of restructuring of heavy industry, but also the spread of the light construction industry – the effect of taking into account of urban elements in urban-industrial area of contemporary Upper Silesia. Those elements are characteristic for contemporary metropolitan cultures and are the result of opening for that type of economy, which is called *soft industry*<sup>1</sup> by British researcher Tim Edensor. The landscape that became more dynamic in postmodern times is provoking simultaneously questions concerning new meaning of locality in the times of intensified civilisational transformations.

The visible sign of the intensity of contemporary economic and political transformations of the region, which entails a change of local culture, is using the post-industrial landscape by film directors. This type of landscape appears to be particularly interesting from the cultural point of view, because it concentrates on the most crucial problems of contemporary places and areas along with their

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1 Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins. Spaces, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005), p. 6.

chronic instability, transitoriness, hybridity as if through a lens. Thanks to that, this landscape can be also considered to be extremely strongly stimulating reflection on the condition of contemporary world and man's place in it. This particular potential of post-industrial relics was probably identified and dealt with most comprehensively and thoroughly by Tim Edensor. According to him: “hidden in ruins are forgotten forms of collectivity and solidarity, lost skills, ways of behaving and feeling, traces of arcane language, and neglected historical and contemporary forms of social enterprise.”<sup>2</sup> In the researcher's opinion, the post-industrial landscape has ontological and epistemological meaning. As the symbol of instability, transgression and blurring of borders, the landscape gives also unique possibilities for critical approach, including deconstruction of signs of ideology and authority through initiation of mode of looking in the space where conflicts and forces clash.

The post-industrial landscape is one of the favourite landscapes chosen by contemporary cinema, which is using it eagerly for aesthetic purposes, mainly as the setting in films belonging to the genre cinema. In this case industrial ruins are mostly treated in an abstract way and out of context, being simply a place of action emphasising terror and incredibility of a plot of given thriller or a horror film so that the camera's eye captures the landscape in a distanced and escapist way. The subject of my interest is the post-industrial landscape, which evokes cultural connotations apart from aesthetic ones and at the same time reveals the anthropological potential. It is connected with the fact that artists have overcome a distanced approach and have become engaged emotionally, and involved in some form of immersion in the observed space in order to identify and show nagging problems. In this case, the post-industrial landscape becomes not only a metonymy of the world fate but also a universal symbol of global change connected with the replacement of production model of goods with the paradigm based on consumption and economy of sign, which in the language of social theory was formulated as “post-industrial society,”<sup>3</sup> but one of the most important symptoms of transformation at the local level, an identifier of the change of cultural specificity, which affected by processes of neglecting, abandoning, marginalisation of industrial heritage as well as being under the influence of the actions aiming at repeated retrieval, restoration and rejuvenation undergoes numerous transformations.

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2 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, pp. 166–167.

3 See Daniel Bell, *The Coming of a Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Jean Baudrillard, *Toward a Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981).

## (In)discreet charm of ruins

Ruins are a kind of magnetic temptation, which best contribute to exciting the imagination just as a secret garden does. This is more or less the thesis that begins the book about post-industrial ruins by Tim Edensor. Disassembly of industrial buildings and decommissioning of the machinery from the technological usage make their semantics blurred and evolving. The author writes: "Since the original uses of ruined buildings has passed, there are limitless possibilities for encounters with the weird."<sup>4</sup> The researcher tries to convince us that strangeness and the air of mystery of ruins are on the one hand sources of their charm and photogenic nature, and on the other hand, they stimulate a reflection of transcendental and transgressive nature, in which the review perspective and the direction of interpretation become emancipated and liberated from usual limitations. Elżbieta Dutka has similar observations – not only does the presence in the landscape of industrial structures, but also their relics make an impression of a "photogenic" space, at the same time they stimulate the reflection of universal nature, concerning the core meaning of existence, transitoriness of life and inevitability of death that result in the melancholy that marks the industrial as well as post-industrial landscape.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the post-industrial ruins reproduce the *Vanitas Motif*, clearly illustrating that everything in this world falls apart, passes and decays, and that reality is fragile and simultaneously difficult to understand in categories of logical whole, doomed to incomplete and fragmentary cognition.

According to Edensor, this trend of thinking about ruins as a place that is characterised by specific visual beauty is an indication of a succession of romantic aesthetics. The attractiveness of ruins was in this way connected with their origins (preferably medieval), sufficient condition (they must have been relatively well preserved), as well as adequate setting: colour of sky, topography of a land, type of climate and weather conditions. Thus, the conditions stated above were considered to be essential to find a landscape as worthy to contemplate it and evaluate according to traditional aesthetic categories: picturesqueness and loftiness. Ruins understood in this way were a part of an abstract space, out of environmental and corporal context, viewed by a subject distanced from an object of interest. In a more general sense, the issue of distance is a crucial characteristic of aesthetic experience, mentioned by Małgorzata Nitka, who refers to Edmund Burke: things (dangerous or scary) can be a source of pleasure; however, the

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4 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 4.

5 Elżbieta Dutka, "Melancholijne pejzaże Śląska" [Melancholic landscapes of Silesia], *Białystok Literature Studies*, Vol. 3 (2012), pp. 79–96.

necessary condition for such kind of feeling is scrutinizing them from “a certain distance.”<sup>6</sup> The aesthetisation of post-industrial spaces seems to be in this context quite an obvious experiment. Densification of area created by accumulation of industrial infrastructure itself causes the landscape to appear to be exceptional. Its destruction dramatically strengthens this effect. The frameworks of factories, piles of debris, and remains stripped of context and deprived of their function meet demand to make an impression of being alien and detached, creating at the same time a universal space, which can be an intriguing field to all artistic activities. As a synthesis of transformations and transgressions, it turns out to be the adequate setting to play a variety of performances – from ancient tragedy to futuristic drama, especially it is considered to be an attractive film open-air used eagerly by action films or *science fiction*. Moreover, its characteristic is the surprising photogenic factor, as Susan Sontag aptly puts it: “Bleak factory buildings and billboard-cluttered avenues look as beautiful, through the camera’s eye, as churches and pastoral landscapes.”<sup>7</sup>

The examples of fascination with industrial and post-industrial landscape can be noted also in films belonging to “Silesian cinema”; however, clearly in this very case, it is difficult to separate aesthetic experience from anthropological one. Silesian cinema as *small cinema* – the regional cinema is most of all a kind of embodied cultural practice, of which distinctive features are geographical, historical and social relations with a place determined by awareness of regional identity, engaging senses and emotions. Thus aesthetic experience is considered to be insufficient for one more reason mentioned by Edensor: “romantic themes are wholly unsuitable for accounting for the industrial ruins,”<sup>8</sup> because it is a space of problematic nature, in which a complicated history and “varied forms of dense sociality occur.”<sup>9</sup> This is true in case of Silesian landscape, of which its photogenic nature almost each time evokes specific real problems. Therefore, if there is marked aesthetisation of landscape in Silesian cinema, it usually goes hand in hand with some form of penetration of a subject that looks into observed space, its intellectual or emotional engagement in the specificity of a place, its response to permeating the landscape economic, political and social issues.

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6 Małgorzata Nitka, “Pokłady wyobraźni: poetyka przestrzeni industrialnej” [Layers of imagination: Poetics of industrial space], in: *Przestrzeń w kulturze i literaturze* [Space in Culture and Literature], ed. Ewa Borkowska (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006), pp. 47–48.

7 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005), p. 61.

8 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 11.

9 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 9.

## Post-industrial landscape and its aesthetic function

There are plenty of examples of exercising the aesthetic function of the landscape in the newest “Silesian cinema.” Simultaneously they demonstrate a kind of intermediation of view on the locality, because the film frames often refer to previous film images that have already gained fixed cultural significance, but also they refer to poetics of literary images or paintings of Silesian intuitive artists (e.g. “Rudzka Group” or “Janowska Group”). The works of art of the latter ones are called in some studies as follows: “regional art,” “Silesian art,” namely “the art created in Silesia and referring to Silesia.”<sup>10</sup> It is a true regional phenomenon and its essential pillars are mining environments and activity of artistic groups created near hard-coal mines.<sup>11</sup> On canvas of the painters of the naive, landscape consists of brick houses, green areas of adjoining gardens and black of nearby slagheaps, and is invariably shrouded in a glow of smoke floating in the air from factory chimneys. The themes discussed in this chapter along with the trend of capturing of the local folklore with the use of expressive colouring contribute to a particular type of depiction.

The film titled *Public Outrage* directed by Maciej Prykowski (2009) clearly relates to this poetics. Through artistic means used in the film plot, it was possible to create a fairy-tale, romantic local atmosphere. The video camera shows picturesque workers’ housing estate called Fytel situated among green areas and fields using distant locations. Following the view, the camera’s eye displays a subtle charm of a place providing a panorama on the surroundings visible from the tower – once a large blast furnace (belonging to “Batory” Foundry in Chorzów), today’s vantage point. On the screen, we can see former industrial areas, which gradually have started to grow over with weeds, transforming the terrain into a wild garden, drowning in fog the (post)industrial settlement, peripheral railway station, to which no trains run any more. Photographs taken by Paweł Dyllus emphasise a monumental loftiness of architecture of former foundry’s buildings; they capture post-industrial emptiness, which is undoubtedly a counterpoint for a housing estate vibrant with workers’ life. However, it is only the aesthetic experience, on which the expression of space ends in that movie; instead of cultural experience,

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10 Marian Pokropek, “Śląska plastyka nieprofesjonalna – wyjątkowa kolekcja” [Silesian unprofessional artistic creativity – Unique collection], in: *Twórcy intuicyjni z kolekcji Barwy Śląska [Intuitive Artists from the Collection Colours of Silesia]*, ed. Stanisław G. Trefoń (Ruda Śląska: Stowarzyszenie “Barwy Śląska,” 2015), p. 15.

11 See Maria Fiderkiewicz, *Śląscy pariasi pędzla i dłuta [Silesian Pariahs of Brush and Chisel]* (Katowice: Muzeum Śląskie, 1994).

there are elements of convention typical for comedy genre. Starting from the way of building narration and ending at drawing of a character, in the movie comes to the forefront as stated Jan F. Lewandowski: “all clownery with the use of not only the setting, but also customs and traditions and even a silesian dialect,”<sup>12</sup> making it one more example of a spontaneous film comedy full of ribald gags.

The next example of the landscape’s aesthetisation in the “Silesian cinema” can be seen in a movie titled *Hyena* directed by Grzegorz Lewandowski (2006), also fitting a post-industrial genre convention – in this case in the form of a horror film. The poetics of space used in that movie is largely referring to the form of contemplation of industrial ruins, which was defined by Tim Edensor as “a sort of modern gothic”<sup>13</sup> – product of “post-industrial nostalgia,”<sup>14</sup> focusing on “dark urban nightscapes, abandoned parking lots, factories, warehouses, and other remnants of post-industrial culture.”<sup>15</sup> The ruins are in this case a foretaste to the expected complete degeneration, a kind of tourist attraction, which makes the subject of the description and aesthetic experience not only the processes of decay, decomposition, darkness, but also a communion with the unspoken, marginalised, repressed. The city is perceived as an area of catastrophe, more connected with – the collapse of modernistic structures of the world, undermining of the progression myth, vision of future extermination of civilization resulting in decadence and signs of macabre that contribute to “the topography of gloomy decay.”<sup>16</sup> Significant is the fact that in the movie *Hyena* the Upper Silesia is not really presented on the screen, neither its name, nor the scope of its topography. The setting, consisting of the left mining premises and industrial facilities along with its surrounding wildlife hideaways, marshes, and tangled paths, is not depicting the region or any other particular city. It is rather abstracted from the geographical context, a post-industrial settlement situated in an undefined space. Spectators may have an impression that the landscape is used here only as a purely aesthetic phenomenon (what is emphasised in the movie by sophisticated architectural layouts entangled by a play of light) and as an element of creating a mood of horror and incredibility.

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12 Jan F. Lewandowski, *Silesian Cinema* (Katowice: Wydawnictwo “Śląsk,” 2012), p. 138.

13 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 13.

14 See Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 13.

15 See Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 13.

16 See Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 14.

## Ruins as “a liminal moment”

Although in the above-mentioned films the aesthetic experience clearly dominates and the setting seems to serve as a necessary background for film plots, it cannot be deemed that the post-industrial landscape is here a completely neutral location. On the contrary, its presence is significant, felt subconsciously to some extent; it symbolises harm, loss and unbalanced social relations. For example, *Hyena* directed by Grzegorz Lewandowski apart from conventional (aesthetic) connotations makes us think about a space in geographical-temporal categories, which gives rise to nostalgic associations, and thus we realise that a space of contemporary horror film – empty, inhuman and ominous – is a former place of active large workplace with thriving industrial infrastructure and social welfare facilities, vibrant with life and in full swing. In this sense, a ruin reminds us about the crisis that has recently occurred, a dual structure of a place has seen a daylight, a place in which there is a border between the former and the contemporary, which allows us to uncover the hidden layers of memory that show a picture entirely different from the present view. Similar suggestions can also be found in a film titled “*Public Outrage*,” in film frames presenting frameworks of former foundry that make a spectator aware of a whole dimension of economic transformation that has been done.

According to Edensor, the presence of industrial ruins in the landscape is a sign of “a liminal moment,” in which a particular place has found its location. That point of time symbolises a state of suspension stretching from abandonment of an area to its falling into total destruction or a discovery of a possibility of redevelopment of an area. In a particular moment, it is considered as a kind of unrealistic *terra nullius* – no man’s land devoid of any distinctive aim of existence. As a post-industrial landscape, it embodies pivotal transitional state between “old” and “new” order, being a “blank area,”<sup>17</sup> which is created after definitive depletion of (natural) resources, at the time, when they have not yet been replaced by new ones. For that reason, it evokes depressive connotations and extreme reactions as a space of shock, loss and “a neglected land.”<sup>18</sup>

This essential state “in transition,” characterised by exceptional emotional tension, has in Silesia its dynamics visible in the ways of using the landscape, both in film and in photography. Transition from “industrial” to “post-industrial” takes place along with political transformation and gets visible in the landscape from the beginning of the 90s. Then “a liminal moment” becomes a discourse about

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17 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 8.

18 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, p. 9.

ecological destruction that results in accumulation in regional iconography of pictures referring to “black Silesia” stereotype – a land devastated by heavy industry, ruined by expansive human activities.<sup>19</sup> Poetics of an image (and rhetoric of narration) from that period is based on a conviction that long-term, irrational usage of natural resources contributed to a complete destruction of the ecosystem in the Upper Silesia – area – which can no longer be the environment suitable for life of a human being, posing a real danger for today’s and future generations. The destruction of industrial landscape at the verge of modern times is associated with disease and death, of which visible signs are degraded soil, civilisation diseases and genetic mutations. Documentaries made on the order of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, Natural Resources and Forestry such as *My Region Silesia* directed by Henryk Urbanek, Krzysztof Zygalski (1991) or *The Fruits of the Black Soil* directed by Mirosław Dembiński (1992) – like early photographies made by Michał Cała belonging to collection titled *Silesia and Galicia* (2013) – show this conflict between nature/culture, humanity/industry, tradition/progress captured in the landscape, in which an apocalyptic vision of destruction – complete devastation of landscape and living environment – ultimately wins.

In the course of ongoing processes of restructuring of heavy industry and closing of consecutive factories and plants, with the result that the most tedious effects of recent exploitation and contamination of environment are becoming less significant, the discourse of “black Silesia” is gradually losing importance. It is obscured by another shock narration adequate for “a liminal moment” – a story about a vanishing landscape. The consequence of political–economic transformation as well as rapid privatisation of state sector and seeking for new sources of profit is waste production, the element of the existing industrial resources treated now as worthless debris. Consecutive buildings, blast furnaces, steelworks, chimneys, hoisting shafts, industrial machines are abandoned or demolished and even the workplace workers’ housing estates are subjected to similar practices. Andrzej Stasiuk reminds us by the suggestive style in his prose that: “These are houses, where people lived too long, in which they died. Big cars shall arrive to remove it and throw away. It sounds strange, but there is a need to remove and throw away houses and cities to make space for the next ones, which will be once removed and

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19 As Elżbieta Dutka writes: “till today the industrial landscape of Silesia with mining shafts and chimneys, horizontally and diagonally levelled pipes and transmission lines, devastated surface of land, refuse heaps, slagheaps, earthfalls, miners’ housing estates and chaotic urban infrastructure is still a kind of ‘showcase,’ a hallmark of this place. Despite tremendous diversity of the landscape in this region, it is still perceived by wider audience in strongly conventionalized way.” Dutka, “Melancholijne pejzaże,” p. 80.

thrown away too.”<sup>20</sup> The state of the post-industrial landscape is shown as a film picture by Anna Stępczak-Patyk in her short film made in Master Film Academy of Andrzej Wajda titled *The End of the Street* (2005), in which local architecture as well as the identity of a place are dematerialised, in this way converting into a film picture.

## Post-industrial landscape as an area of conflict

In the course of time and as a result of the growth of social awareness, the intensifying process of wasting technical monuments increases the activity of citizens’ resistance visible in a growing number of foundations and associations aiming at the protection of industrial heritage. At the background, ruins and debris produced at a rapid pace can be distinguished; however, the architecture preserved in satisfactory condition is now demanding a rescue or at least a creation of a documentation concerning its existence in iconic form before its final dematerialisation. An important reason of attachment to post-industrial ruins is nostalgia intensified now by late fascination with the landscape from the childhood, which let one’s heart be troubled by rapid passing away and transition into debris, and also a memory of not prosperous, but vital and operative past, contrasted with the contemporary emptiness and miserable condition. Additionally, a factor that stimulates the interest in a ruin is a fact perceived in public space, namely the lack of developed rational policy of management of industrial heritage by local self-government.

That artistic approach is a distinctive feature of activity of young generation of artists – photographers with a penchant for multimedia, including Marek Stańczyk. Since 2008, he has documented the twilight of Silesian industry, capturing with the camera’s eye subsequent actions of decommissioning of mines and factories. In a series of authorial films titled *Made in Silesia – Industrial Landscape* (2011), he managed to capture demolition of such gigantic mining facilities as buildings of former KWK (coal mine) “Andaluzja” in Piekary Śląskie or KWK “New Wirek” in Ruda Śląska, thanks to which his films, as he said, constitute today: “sole ‘eyewitness’ – visible – liquidation processes and changes in silesian landscape.”<sup>21</sup> Similar approach to the landscape characterises Mark Locher called

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20 Andrzej Stasiuk, “I tak to się wszystko kiedyś skończy” [It will all eventually come to an end], in: *Czarno-biały Śląsk [Black and White Silesia]*, ed. Wojciech Wilczyk (Katowice: Galeria Zderzak, Górnośląskie Centrum Kultury, 2004), p. 5.

21 Andrzej Koniakowski, “Marek Stańczyk – a panoramic gaze” (accessed 3 January 2017) <http://www.koniakowski.pl/2012-3.html>.

“a photographer of a lost landscape,” the author of multimedia project titled *Human and Machine* (2015). Those interests are evidenced by titles of his subsequent series of works: *Here Things Changed*, *Silence of Historical Places*, *The End of Mine*, *Silesia – Returns and Goodbyes*. The falling chimneys and shafts, reinforced concrete structures, machines and railway tracks are the motifs continuously present in black-and-white photographs made by the artist. What is peculiar about them is that the facilities are captured in the camera’s eye at the moment of their demolition as if at the moment of letting their dying breath.

The pictures of the artists mentioned above certainly reveal in many cases surprising, monumental beauty of industrial ruins; however – maybe foremost – they capture traces of turbulent history of industry constituting a material indicator of fragile cultural identity of the region. Stańczyk treats the ruins as monuments of transitory history, which brittle and die, due to negligence and affected by deliberate, but hasty destructions activities resulting from “lack of awareness of society about historical monument and their roots.”<sup>22</sup> Locher, in turn, on the question of what interests him in ruins, replied: “That is my protest. Look what you have done. What we are losing, because of your thoughtlessness. Sometimes I understand it, because those facilities are hard to adapt, too contaminated. But is there a need to demolish most of them?”<sup>23</sup> In this regard, both artists treat the post-industrial landscape no longer as an object of contemplation, but as a form of participation. In order to discover information about poorly accessible places, they study maps, illustrations and old photographs, and exchange the experiences with enthusiasts like them on the Internet forums, so that they could later on penetrate particular elements of landscape in an emotional way and with the embodied approach and via the camera’s eye capture them before they vanish from the surface of the earth.

Conflictuality of the landscape is most noticeable in documentaries, in which the Silesia as a whole is presented in a real and metaphorical sense as a ruin. This is the case for example in the film directed by Michael Majerski *The Upper Silesia – Here Is Where We Meet* (2013). Intertwined into the documentary film frames by

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22 Małgorzata Węgiel-Wnuk, “Marek Stańczyk shows photographs that document the fall of Sienkiewicz tower former KWK Andaluzja,” *Dziennik Zachodni [Western Daily]* 23 May 2012, (accessed 1 January 2017) <http://piekaryslaskie.naszemiasto.pl/artykul/marek-stanczyk-pokazuje-zdjecia-dokumentujace-upadek-wiezy,1414243,artgal,t,id,tm.html#521f4162c6f04995,1,3,4>.

23 Tomasz Malkowski, “Marek Locher: a photographer of the lost landscape” (accessed 3 January 2017).<http://www.zmianmce.fora.pl/informacje-z-myslowic,13/marek-locher-fotograf-utraconego-krajobrazu,214.html>

Marek Stańczyk and more, the whole landscape presented on the screen, not only the one connected with factories showing mining shafts and towers falling apart, but also the urban landscape constituting a gloomy hallmark of post-industrial districts, becomes one big metonymy of the Upper Silesia problem. The key issue is, according to the director, the deep crisis of the place caused not only by the ruined material industrial heritage, but also by cultural devastation being the result of breaking the ties, which in the past were connecting local culture and German tradition. The controversies of post-industrial landscape are shown, in yet another way, through the lens of Adam Sikora. In the documentary titled *Corpus Christi* (2005) and in a feature film created jointly with Ingmar Villqist, titled *Eve* (2010), is presented “dying” of the region. Destruction of the architecture of mining workers’ estate is here tantamount to the collapse of local culture and identity. In the course of undergoing political transformations along with closed mines and increasing unemployment, such cultural features as working-class ethos, local customs and traditions, and lifestyle are steadily irrevocably departing, in this way leading to their eradication.

## Conclusions

The post-industrial landscape as a space of accumulated problems resulting from the necessary reconfiguration of world makes us think it over. Many researchers, for example Elizabeth Mahoney, recognise it as a symbol of contemporary places infused with “difference, fragmentation, pluralism.”<sup>24</sup> In this context, taking into account only the beauty of ruins (if we want to search for such kind of aesthetics in film frames) is equivalent to the downgrading the meaning, which in fact turns out to be far more complex. Maria Popczyk indicates the limitations of post-industrial landscape only to a form resulting from the aesthetic experience, providing the landscape with values of objects with neutralised meaning, which perceived for selfless reasons constitute only *decorum*, a kind of expressive background.<sup>25</sup> However, the cultural experience demonstrates deeper reflections of artists and simultaneously it can become a specific reception strategy. In both cases the post-industrial landscape becomes a document of conflict, waste,

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24 Elisabeth Mahoney, “The people in parentheses: Space under pressure in the post-modern city,” in: *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 168.

25 Maria Popczyk, “Krajobraz jako obraz” [The landscape images], in: *Krajobraz kulturowy [The Cultural Landscape]*, eds. Beata Frydryczak and Mieszko Ciesielski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2014), p. 58–59.

exploitation. It reveals an existential dimension of a place, emotions and experience, which accompany its reception.

Finally, we can evoke views of William J. T. Mitchell, who advocates the change in thinking about the landscape, treating it not as a noun form, but a verb form (“from a noun to the verb”).<sup>26</sup> In this way landscape is not understood as an object that we can see or a text to read, but as a process by means of which individual and social identities can be formed.<sup>27</sup> According to the researcher, the landscape is not a kind of art, but it is “a cultural medium.”<sup>28</sup> “Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.”<sup>29</sup> Such a view of post-industrial landscape captured in “Silesia cinema” becomes a space, of which penetration can provide us with interesting conclusions going beyond the issues concerning poetics of picture, styles and artistic conventions, which refer to life itself – transforming locality and identity of a place.

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## 19. Once upon a time there used to live a people... *Neighborhooders* and *The Heritage* as fairy tales about the Polish “excluded”

**Abstract:** Polish society still carries its wounds after years of communism and political system transformation as the introduction of capitalism brutally threw out all the people who were passive in their society and their own life under the Polish Peoples’ Republic into the social margin. They were neglected not only in the social-political sphere but also in the cultural one. In Polish films, only their decay or glorification was shown, which increased the feeling of exclusion. This situation has been illustrated by the films *Neighborhooders* (2014, Grzegorz Królikiewicz) and *The Heritage* (2011, Andrzej Barański). Both film directors are looking for a new language of expression to portray the fate of a lower class – they transcend the discourse of social engagement and instead of using the language of *Cepeliada* and folklore, they create stories bordering on fairy tales.

**Keywords:** *Neighborhooders*, *The Heritage*, Grzegorz Królikiewicz, Andrzej Barański, Andrzej Leder, lower class, exclusion, identity, film language, Polish cinema

Polish society still carries its wounds after many historical turbulences, many of which occurred only in the twentieth century: occupation by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, years of communism and the political system transformation, and the introduction of capitalism which brutally threw out into the social margin all the people who were passive in their society and their own life under the Polish Peoples’ Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa – PRL). The data collected by the Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny – GUS) shows that 12% of the Polish population in 2013–2014 were living below the national poverty threshold and 7% were living in absolute poverty. The emasculation of a lower class in Poland is one of the main aftermaths of the twentieth century. Poverty and the lack of social and political meaning are not the only form of marginalization. The reluctance to discuss social discourse as class discourse together with a strong stratification of society caused that the lower class was rarely discussed, which additionally reinforced their exclusion.

It was neglected not only in the social-political sphere but also in the cultural one. In Polish films, only its decay was shown which increased the feeling of exclusion. The Polish “excluded’s” *mise-en-scène* depicts pathology with plenitude of vodka, crime and a downfall: a countryside is full of dangerous rednecks with axes (i.e. Wojciech Smarzowski’s *The Wedding/Wesele* [2004] or *The Dark House/Dom zły* [2009]) and panel buildings (simple and cheap tenement houses built for common people) are the synecdoche of lost hopes (i.e. Robert Gliński’s *Hi, Tereska/Cześć, Tereska* [2001] or Tomasz Wasilewski’s *United States of Love/Zjednoczone stany miłości* [2016]). On the other hand, Polish contemporary cinema reveals a modernist tradition in which – before heavy post-war industrialization – villagers are glorified. The period known as Young Poland used to be enthralled by country folklore, people’s simplicity and authenticity. One of the main representatives of this tradition is Jan Jakub Kolski (*Johnnie the Aquarius/Jańcio Wodnik* [1993] or *History of Cinema in Popielawy/Historia kina w Popielawach* [1998]). Each of these cinematic tendencies is clichéd and ahistorical, therefore apolitical and disregarding toward the identity of the lower class, but recent years have been showing a possible evolution. Marcin Wrona meditated on Polish memory in *Demon* (2015) and Agnieszka Smoczyńska explored Polish legends on political transformation’s background in *The Lure/Córki dancingu* (2015). But Grzegorz Królikiewicz’s *Neighborhooders/Sąsiady* (2014) and Andrzej Barański’s *The Heritage/Księstwo* (2011) remain the most profound and diversified reflection on the Polish lower class and – what is more important – constitute a bold, maybe even blatant attempt to create a lower class mythology.

The first film narrative concentrates on the inhabitants in one of the tenement houses in Łódź, and the other film deals with the story of a young man who attempts to escape from a village to a city. Both film directors are looking for a new language of expression to portray the fate of the lower class – they transcend the discourse of social engagement and instead of using the language of Cepeliada and folklore, they create stories bordering on fairy tales. Królikiewicz and Barański formed the poetic language that includes the grotesque, mitologization of discourse, universalization of space and the use of anachronistic narrative formulas (sylves, fairy tales and ballads) in order to appreciate underprivileged groups.

## A poor Pole looks at the ghetto

It is not possible to start the case studies of films mentioned above before their contextualization. As Marek Smoleń pointed out, political transformation in Poland had many social effects – frustration, a sense of grievance and helplessness, social isolation, addictions, increased pathological conduct, delinquency, family

dysfunctions, a division into Poland A and B, and so on – which are derived from unemployment and impoverishment, above all.<sup>1</sup> Although his study correctly elaborates on the side effects of the process of decommunization, democratization and transformation into market economy, it seems shortsighted and dismissive toward people's psyche, or rather disadvantaged cultural memory that has lost its social operativeness. As Jan Assmann wrote, memory constitutes community – “just as the art of memory pertains to learning, so does the culture of recollection to planning and hope, i.e. to staking out social horizons of meaning and time”.<sup>2</sup> But what happens when this collective memory is blocked and superseded as in the case of the Polish lower class? And what causes this process? These are the questions which Andrzej Leder tried to answer in *Dreamt Revolution*.

In the beginning of his book Leder quotes Charles Taylor considering social imaginaries as the foundation of social meaning. But they are annihilated during periods of a downfall when we can observe the catastrophe of a symbolical field.<sup>3</sup> Author's underlying thesis is that we are still living in Folwark (grange buildings) with its prevalent serfdom relations and worldview, which is caused by the fact that Polish modernization was mediated by German and Russian oppressors and therefore rejected. For Leder, the auto-destructiveness of the lower class and the cosmopolitanism of a middle class in Poland are not the heritage of occupation or transformation, but of serfdom and “dreamt revolution” from 1939 to 1956. The delegitimization of social order did not bring any alternative so the “excluded” fed themselves with perceived, resentment-based grievances.<sup>4</sup> In 1939, Soviets and Nazi Germans invaded Poland – that disaster revealed hidden desires and started revolutionary operations. Polish society transformed but without subjective contribution.

Above all, a previous hierarchy was fractured after 1939 – a sense of humiliation was predominant but affected essentially pre-war elites and the middle class. The townsmen group's existence was problematic due to its members' ethnicity: there were mostly Jews. Their presence in pre-war Poland had already raised controversies and inspired a strong antisemitism even in official political statements. This public

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- 1 See: Marek Smoleń, „Społeczne skutki procesów transformacji gospodarczej w wymiarze lokalnym,” *Nierówności społeczne a wzrost gospodarczy. Część II – Racjonalizacja i globalizacja*, vol. 9 (2006), pp. 283–296.
  - 2 Jan Assman, “Cultural Memory: Script, Recollection, and Political Identity in Early Civilizations,” *Historiography East and West*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2003), p. 159.
  - 3 See: Andrzej Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej 2014), pp. 10–11.
  - 4 See: Leder, *Prześlona rewolucja*, pp. 35–36.

mood prepared a ground for Nazi German crimes toward Jewish nation in Poland – these atrocities often provoked mixed feelings and even moved some Poles into a non-coerced participation in Holocaust (i.e. the massacre in Jedwabne). After 1945, Poles took Jewish place in society, creating new social stratification and ethnically Polish bourgeoisie on genocide.<sup>5</sup> For Leder, this is the reason why contemporary middle class has problems with its identity and history – a morally dubious heritage caused the process of a psychological repression (understood in the frame of collective memory). The descendants of serfs capitalized opportunity for social and political advancement but denied it – the next generations were willingly (and artificially) creating their history on noble roots. No one could call them impostors because of the Polish landed gentry's extermination. Soviets encouraged peasants to rebel and take revenge on lords, which they did not only for materialistic motives, but also to save their personal integrity and reclaim their dignity after centuries of contempt. However, common people did not identify themselves with revolution and its goals, which came from within and therefore they opened to the defense mechanism of regression: “unstable and lacking any point of reference (connected with pre-war hierarchies) Polish imaginary retreated to simpler and more directly affectionate forms”<sup>6</sup> – i.e. miraculous religion. The lower class emphasizes the division between Good and Evil, hence their patriotism and national identity involve primitive “we-they” dialectics.

*Dreamt Revolution* is a historical elaboration on Polish memory, postmemory and mentality based on them – or maybe on their lack. “People cannot act as subjects and build any community because of their inability to recollect.”<sup>7</sup> The lower class has an indolent mentality, still living in a power relations created in Folwarks. The absence of social influence goes hand in hand with the lack of any responsibility. This social group lives in the present, reluctant to critical thinking, dialogue, or reaching a consensus. Hence years of Sovietization did not change Polish citizen into conformist *homo sovieticus* but only amplified residues resulting from serfdom. We can find critical examination of traditional class roles in Polish society in Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, elaborate discourse on this ambivalent heritage in *In the Name of Jakub S.*, controversial spectacle by Paweł Demirski and Monika Strzępka<sup>8</sup>, and in mythopoetic films by Andrzej Barański

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5 See: Leder, *Przeźniona rewolucja*, p. 88.

6 Leder, *Przeźniona rewolucja*, p. 152.

7 Leder, *Przeźniona rewolucja*, p. 94.

8 See: Joanna Derkaczew, “W imię Jakuba S: Nie wstyďte się słomy z butów,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 10.12.2011: 19 Feb. 2017 [wyborcza.pl/1,75410,10791500,\\_W\\_imie\\_Jakuba\\_S\\_\\_\\_Nie\\_wstydzicie\\_sie\\_slomy\\_z\\_butow.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75410,10791500,_W_imie_Jakuba_S___Nie_wstydzicie_sie_slomy_z_butow.html).

and Grzegorz Królikiewicz. Both film directors use the notion of myth, fairy tale or legend in order to invent a new point of reference for rumination and for creating new identity. As Jacques Le Goff noticed, previously submissive societies should make an effort to define themselves through rediscovery and acknowledgment of their past, because memory “is an essential element of... individual or collective identity, the feverish and anxious quest for which is today one of the fundamental activities of individuals and societies.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Heritage* and delusive social mobility**

Writing about Polish cinema, Natasza Korczarowska coined the concept of “private homelands” as a mythological frame of reference for individuals. It is a space based on myth and symbol, subjective reality structured by repetitions and which lasts in somehow constant order. Tadeusz Konwicki, Andrzej Kondratiuk, and Jan Jakub Kolski – to whom we may add Andrzej Jakimowski or Lech Majewski – share convictions about memory’s function: “Memory – emotional memory which is also the record of the most painful experiences – is the only way for restoring a sense of meaning and protecting from a nihilist urge.”<sup>10</sup> Królikiewicz and Barański are convinced of that but they depict the reverse of these worlds. In their universe the exact notion of a “homeland” is ambivalent, their characters are not connected with the world, but they exist as monads, the core of their identity is a sense of being excluded, not a national or local tradition. Both film directors try to explore this limbo and construct its mythology and memory.

In the first sequence of *The Heritage*, young main character, Zbyszek Pasternak, is building a mouse trap (it can be interpreted either as a reference to the Polish legend about king Popiel or as a metaphor of entrapment) when his drunk father comes back to the house and starts his monologue,

You have to remember that we descended from powerful prince of Vistulans who is described in *Vita Cirilli*. Do you understand? Unfortunately, our descendants had begun marrying subaltern women and now we, the eagles, have to live among the hens. I hope you will help our family to regain our eagle power. I must teach you how to fly. The thing you did today, you know – this mouse trap, was something extraordinary. I am sure it is a sign! You will be a great lord someday and I will guard a new dynasty. But first you have to get rid of your childhood.

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9 Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 98.

10 Natasza Korczarowska, *Ojczyzny prywatne. Mitologia przestrzeni prywatności w filmach Tadeusza Konwickiego, Jana Jakuba Kolskiego, Andrzeja Kondratiuka* (Kraków: Rabid, 2007), p. 17.

After these words, father cuts his son's hair and destroys his old baby carriage initiating a rite of passage. This sequence shows in a grotesque way a misconception leading to megalomania and fake identity. Simultaneously, it is a synecdoche of striving for this identity and political meaning.

The central part of this fairy tale is painful in depicting consequences of this fake mythology. Zbyszek descends into a deep sense of humiliation and realizes his failure. He lives in Lublin where he studies law (he fails at exams and is expelled from the university), starves, works as a stockman, and commits petty crimes because he has lost a chance for a career in football after sports injury. When he comes back to his village, the local residents are very critical of his person as a highbrow and ungrateful "runaway" who has left his mother alone working in the fields as an agricultural laborer. Zbyszek is torn between village and city but belongs nowhere. The film includes loosely connected sequences from which his opportunism and copying father's auto-destructive patterns emerge. He is involved in a fight between two villages; an embarrassing sex intercourse; depressing work in a sawmill, whose owner employs mostly alcoholics; and in situations when he is a victim of constant jibes. Moreover, a sense of humiliation and being disadvantaged is a common feeling for all local people. It is especially emphasized in the sequence of village dogs being euthanized by town's people who are well-educated so they can dominate the discourse. One of the last scenes depicts a roadblock – villagers protest against their situation, lack of social meaning and poverty, but simultaneously they show the anomaly of a social cohesion: "You cannot ignore Polish peasants anymore. We do not give a fuck that other people also have problems. We must think only about ourselves". So they are – they pass delayed trucks when drivers give them some vodka, shut down the roadblock and run away with fruits picked up from a lorry. A rebellion ends and they return to their purgatory with an ad hoc trophy.

Although villagers are shown mostly as auto-destructive, grotesque, disorganized, unable of consistent action, and even ridiculous, Barański does not divest them of their dignity. The province in *The Heritage* is claustrophobic, unattractive and coarse, maybe even doomed. However, the film director looks at it in search of glimpses of hope and dignity. He has a compassion for this entrapment. In the last scene, father and son wander with poppy seeds for the monastery, but they lose them while climbing up the hill. Socio-political reality plunges the Polish province into a downfall, but in this metaphorical sequence Barański creates an elegy for the "excluded".

### ***Neighborhooders* and (a) film dialect(s)**

Królikiewicz's film compounds this sense of entrapment by means of an experimental film language. The damped, narrow apartments with poor wall units do not signify the provisional character of their lives – although film director depicts a rather deterministic vision, he connects it with the occurrence of small epiphanies and liberations. Action of the film takes place in Łódź's tenements called *famuly*. Their inhabitants are depicted in a complex way – they are often agonized and desperate by their exclusion, poverty and overwhelming violence, but these degraded human beings also degrade others. They are not able to communicate with the outside world and they are not self-conscious. Królikiewicz shows their routine – preparing for Christmas Eve, gossiping, quarrels, struggling for rudimentary supplies, and so on – in ten episodes, which seem apocalyptic and poetic simultaneously. They isolate themselves from the outside world but the society is not eager to acknowledge their demotic component: as in the sequence with an honored doctor who liquidates hospital in order to stop “worshipping autochthons” and “feeding bloodsuckers”. He responds to an older, compassionate professor protesting against the cruelty of this shutdown: “Everyone here is so ill that we have not got anyone to treat. Medicine is not a propaganda”. Then he does not want to help a man with a heart attack, explaining that he is dirty and must sober up.

Królikiewicz is one of the most consistent and radical Polish film directors interested in the lower class and the process of exclusion. In his debut, *Through and Through/Na wylot* (1973) he depicted a young, poor, married couple that decides to kill an older couple in an act of social revenge and as a compensation for years of injustices. In another movie, *The Case of Bronek Pekosiński/Przypadek Pekosińskiego* (1993), his “man without qualities” is a metaphor of historical determinism influencing particularly the poorest. Królikiewicz is fascinated by simple men, “men from the cellar” – they are unattractive, unreasonable, and untalented, but he depicts their inner world: emotions, struggling and feelings. His characters are not only a matter and the set of socio-political determinants but also spiritual beings. In *Neighborhooders*, they get a narrative and a form appropriate to coin their mythology. As Krzysztof Świrek wrote in his review, “According to stereotyped thinking, Królikiewicz's characters do not do anything, exist in a void, practically do not live. They sit on window sill all day, quarrel ceaselessly without any reasonable cause, and stand next to their tenements perpetually. They only pretend to have any occupation. But in *Neighborhooders* their life unveils its own language: recurring motives, peculiar rituals and obsessions. It is complex to the extent of incomprehensiveness to the outsiders”.<sup>11</sup>

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11 Krzysztof Świrek, „Sąsiedzi“ (review), *Kino*, vol. 3, 2015, pp. 68–69.

A film language, or rather a film dialect, created by Królikiewicz and Barański is engulfed in their idiosyncrasies, but there are many common elements: a high level of mythologization, the use of grotesque, an emphasis on individual–society relations, a time deformation, a space universalization, segmented structures, repetitions and anachronistic narrative formulas. *The Heritage* combines three language registers: local dialect, which is predominant in Zbyszek's village, literary language absorbed by the character, and chivalric stylization, which can be called an artificial language of Zbyszek's aspirations. This heterogeneity is transferred to film form in a holistic way. *The Heritage* resembles rural drawn-out story in its dramaturgy: the plot develops from one anecdote to another as neighbors pass rumors next to fences; form creates a distance due to Jacek Petrycki's black-and-white photography but it is "ornamented" by tawdry music and mannerism typical for amateur theaters – and in the folk art's simplicity. *Neighborhooders* are more avant-garde, subversive and mythopoetic. Królikiewicz replaces cinema of social commitment with its interventional tone with surrealism, anti-aesthetic, onirism, grotesque, and hyperbolic imaginary. The film lacks coherence – poetic dialogues are interrupted by sporadic introspections, Marek Dyjak's drunk-through voice is juxtaposed with Pergolesi's *Salve Regina*, a celebrity body-builder plays a priest; plants on wife's and husband's graves – as on Tristan's and Iseult's – intertwine with each other, the sardonic irony mingles with lyricism, beautiful ghosts accompany hideous "moral authorities", and two tenements approach each other closing the exit to the outside world where only Lewis Carroll's white rabbit can force his way through.

*The Heritage* and *Neighborhooders* create new folk archetypes. They are interested in the lower class but not in its potential pathologies, apathy or passivity. Królikiewicz and Barański re-enact the exact notion of "a people" and create an alternative form for it. Both films tell stories about social conflicts and the reality of the "excluded" in a way close to magic realism's imaginary. Either in the provinces (Barański) or in the city (Królikiewicz) – although a people's psyche still can be marginalized – it gains a possibility of ingraining itself and creating its own identity through storytelling.

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