

Polish Cinematic Dystopias

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POLISH CINEMATIC DYSTOPIAS: METAPHORS OF LIFE UNDER COMMUNISM – AND BEYOND

In this essay I intend to identify and discuss the main features of dystopias, as represented in Polish cinema during the communist period. I will limit my analysis to the five most distinguished Polish science fiction films, produced in the relatively short time span between the late 1970s and mid-1980s: four by Piotr Szulkin: *Golem* (1979), *Wojna światów - następne stulecie* (*War of the Worlds - Next Century*, 1981), *O-bi, o-ba. Koniec cywilizacji* (*O-bi, O-ba. The End of Civilization*, 1985) *Ga, ga, chwala bohaterom* (*Ga, Ga. Glory of the Heroes*, 1986) and one by Juliusz Machulski: *Seksmisja* (*Sex Mission*, 1983). It is widely accepted that these films criticised communist rule; the image of life in a distant future or on a far off planet served as a useful metaphor of life in communist Poland (Jankun 1984; Zarębski 1984; Skwara 1985; Smoczyński 2002). Accordingly, one purpose of my paper will be to establish what in particular Polish filmmakers criticised and how. Furthermore, I will argue that Polish cinematic dystopias dealt with the dangers represented in Western science fiction literature and cinema. The ultimate question of my paper is: in what respects are Polish cinematic dystopias "parochial" and in what sense "universal"? Rather than consider film after film, I will try to construct a synthetic image of Polish cinematic dystopia, when appropriate, drawing attention to differences between particular films.

Inspirations and connections

Polish science fiction films of the late 1970s and early 1980s were typically interpreted as metaphors for the socio-political situation in Poland after 1945. Some were even associated with a particular historical moment, especially *War of the Worlds*, regarded as Szulkin's prophetic allegory of the martial state, introduced in Poland in December 1981 (Smoczyński 2002).⁽¹⁾ They also allude to the dystopias created in other cultures. In some cases the link is indicated by the very title of the film or its dedication. Szulkin's *Golem* is inspired by the book by Gustav Meyrink of the same title, which was a re-writing of an old Jewish legend about a "new Adam," an improvement of the human race (Ćwikiel 1984: 66). Szulkin's *War of the Worlds* refers to the classic of H.G. Wells, and is dedicated to Wells and Orson Welles, the author of a famous radio programme, which in 1938 induced panic amongst the American audience. We also find connections between Szulkin's films and *1984* (1949) by George Orwell, as well as between *Sex Mission* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Furthermore, there are affinities between these films and science fiction productions in other socialist countries. The most striking correspondence appears between Szulkin's films, especially *O-bi, O-ba. The End of Civilization* and the Czechoslovak film *Den sedmý, osmá noc* (*Seventh Day, Eighth Night*, 1969), directed by Evald Schorm, due to their pervading atmosphere of utter pessimism.

The reasons for these connections are various. The similarity between Polish science fiction films and those made in other socialist countries can be explained by the fact that this genre was widely used in the cinemas of the whole Soviet Block as a vehicle to criticise the socio-political system, when direct criticism was prevented by various forms of censorship. The link with Western dystopias and science fiction films may be explained by the fact that artists of a certain type experience the world in a similar way, irrespective of the place they are born or live. Susan Sontag in her seminal essay about science-fiction films, "The imagination of disaster," claims that they are rooted in the "imagination of disaster" and respond primarily to the experience of the present day and the fears which it brings such as an uncontrollable development of science and technology and dehumanisation of human life (Sontag 1994: 224-225). Moreover, Sontag and other authors, such as Vita Fortunati and Jerome F. Shapiro argue that science fiction films reflect mythological aspect of human thinking (Sontag 1994; Fortunati 1993; Shapiro 2002); they are a re-writing of such old myths and legends as the aforementioned story of a "new Adam" or "new Messiah."

Moreover, Western dystopias are not dissimilar to those produced in the East because they were often modelled on communist states, particularly Soviet Russia, becoming their exaggerated images. Some of the Western dystopias, especially that depicted in Orwell's classic, proved to be so persuasive that in due course

they influenced the thinking about the future of artists from the Eastern bloc. It could be also suggested that by situating their films in the context of earlier masterpieces of the science fiction Polish directors, especially Piotr Szulkin then attempted to demonstrate their familiarity with the classics of the genre and prove that their visions of the future are by no means parochial. The similarity between Polish dystopias of the late 1970s and early 1980s and those produced in the West results also from the greater homogeneity of the lifestyles of those living in the communist and capitalist countries. It is worth mentioning here that from the early 1970s, when Edward Gierek became the leader of the communist party in Poland, Poles were not only allowed, but even encouraged to follow Western ways. One feature of the everyday existence shared by Poles and Westerners during this period appears to me of particular importance: the proliferation and increased importance of the media, especially television, both in conveying political ideas and in filling the free time of ordinary people, even shaping their lives according to the television schedules. The perceived consequence of the power of the media was people's detachment from each other and the decline of communal life.

On the following pages I will look at various aspects of Polish dystopia, situating it against the backdrop of Polish reality of the time, as well as some Western representations of life in a distant future.

Beginnings of a dystopian world

In the majority of Polish science films of the 1980s, dystopia is the result of a sudden and unexpected event, induced by humans, typically a nuclear war, or is caused by contacts with the inhabitants of a different planet. The first event is usually represented to the masses as a negative occurrence, which nevertheless produced or might produce something positive, even a better world than the one which existed before; this scenario is hinted at in *Golem*, *O-bi*, *O-ba* and *Sex Mission*. Similarly, invasion by extra-terrestrial civilizations, which is depicted in *War of the Worlds*, or human colonisation of far-off planets, as in *Ga, Ga*, is represented to the indigenous population as a friendly visit, which will bring them only benefits.

The immediate result of a nuclear catastrophe is the wipe-out of a large part of the human population and widespread contamination, which prevents people from staying outdoors, or significantly reduces their quality of life. In *O-bi*, *O-ba* the survivors of a nuclear war hide from poisoned air in a dome situated in high mountains, in *Sex Mission* - in a large, concrete bunker deep below the surface. In *Golem* they still live in normal houses and go out, but their field of action is very limited, as leaving their immediate neighbourhood appears to be very dangerous. Moreover, it is suggested that the survivors are not fit to adapt to the new conditions. Hence, the need to create a new man: the eponymous Golem. As a consequence of the contamination, outdoors in Szulkin's films feel like indoors, they are very dark and filled with smog, with few plants and no animals. Interiors, on the other hand, lack the intimacy and comfort of real homes; they are typically large, open spaces, crammed with useless objects, but with minimal facilities, where large numbers of people must fulfil their basic needs in close proximity to each other.

Colonisation by foreign civilizations has similar consequences for the local population, as nuclear catastrophe. To facilitate their control the masters reduce the living space of the inhabitants by introducing numerous restrictions, such as a curfew, use of special identity cards and forcing the natives to abandon their houses (possibly to make space for the occupiers) and move to prison-like hostels. Moreover, the streets, in common with the interiors, become subjected to constant surveillance.

Both the war and the colonisation by aliens can be regarded as an allusion to apocalyptic events (apocalyptic at least in the discourse of Polish anti-communist opposition) which began the dystopian period of Polish history: the Second World War and German occupation followed by Russian occupation and colonization. In *War of the Worlds* we even observe a series of colonisations, following each other in quick succession, which mirrors Poland's post-1945 history, or perhaps Polish "fate" in more general terms. I refer here to the fact that since the end of 18th century, Poland was almost continuously somebody's colony and that the colonisers often used the language of benign, friendly guests.

The invaders from the other world are represented as on the whole creatures inferior to humans. They are short, fat and zombie-like; their movements are mechanical and clumsy and they lack any individuality. Despite that, they are able to overpower the humans without much effort. Again, such a portrayal of otherworldly creatures conforms both to the way they are depicted in the bulk of science-fiction films (Sontag 1994: 221) and to popular opinions about the Soviet "colonizers" of Poland. It is worth mentioning here that the Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, was perceived by many Poles as mechanical, mummy-like, almost

”inhuman.”

Political organisation and forms of oppression

Nuclear catastrophe or alien invasion is accompanied or followed in the discussed films by an oppressive political order. The authorities use the citizens for their own means, which often remain obscure for the viewers and for the oppressed themselves. The tools of oppression are varied. One is police and military force, who deal with political dissidents by imprisoning them, sending them to far-off planets, performing medical experiments on them or even killing them. Another is propaganda, typically conveyed by the media, which allows dystopia to masquerade as utopia. Hence, in *War of the Worlds* television and loud-speakers situated on the streets claim that giving blood to Martians is good for the health of the donors (despite numerous corpses lying on the streets of those who died of anaemia after conforming to this request). In *Sex Mission* the bulwark of civic education is the idea that avoiding sex makes women happy. Even death after torture in *Ga, Ga* is represented as a glorious moment for those who fall victim to it. Such blatant propaganda is more reminiscent of the behaviour of the Nazis during the Second World War, an example being the slogan ”Arbeit macht frei” (Work brings freedom) at the gates of the concentration camps, than of the communist authorities in Poland who were on the whole rather anxious to tell people that black is white. Eventually, the authorities oppress the population by economic means. There is always a shortage of material goods, so in order to ”receive” them from the state, people are coerced to serve their oppressors obediently and spy on each other.

Although the state expects from its citizens complete obedience, loyalty towards the masters does not guarantee any privileges, as the masters are dishonest and unpredictable, changing their rules every day. Similarly, although the dystopian system is hierarchical, the hierarchies are unstable - the exception is the feminist state in *Sex Mission* who has the same leader for as long as it exists. People who enjoy a relatively high place in the social hierarchy without any particular reason can lose the favour of the leaders and vice versa - people ”from nowhere,” without any achievements can be promoted to the highest positions. It could be argued that the unpredictability and dishonesty of the authorities increases the fear of the masses and helps to control them. On the other hand, such a lack of rationality might indicate the weakness of the system - by getting rid of its most loyal servants and followers the authorities lose any real support and become vulnerable to rebellion. This, on the other hand, increases the need to use military and police force against real and possible dissidents. The type of authoritarianism, as represented by Szulkin, reminds us most of Stalinist Russia where cleansing of real and imaginary political enemies was a stalwart of state internal policy.

In *O-bi, O-ba* Szulkin offers us an authoritarian state which lost both the power to govern its citizens and even any interest in exerting control over them. Consequently, what we observe is more reminiscent of anarchy than of a well organised military state. The high ranking civil servants and leaders are as convinced about the dystopian character and ultimate demise of their world as are ordinary people, if not more so. Moreover, all feel equally imprisoned in this disastrous reality. I will suggest that this film can be interpreted as a metaphor for a communist state in its decadent form, resembling Poland both during the end of Gierek’s rule, as well after the martial state, when both the citizens and politicians dreamt about the best possible way out of the despicable situation, rather than of improving the status quo from within. It is worth adding that in this film, unlike in the remaining ones included in my discussions, the leader is not really to blame for the misery of the citizens. If he ever cheated them, he did so in the interest of both himself and his subjects.

Although the authorities in the discussed films only pretend to act for the welfare of its citizens, those represented in *Sex Mission* avoid using any excessive force and sometimes even reward their loyal lieutenants with promotion and material privileges. There is a significant degree of consistency in their decisions and on the whole, life in such a state is bearable. The leader, addressed by her subordinates as Her Highness, can even be regarded as a sympathetic figure who oppresses her subjects only to an extent which allows her a comfortable life and a degree of freedom. I will describe this state as an ”enlightened” tyrant and suggest that it is reminiscent of ”real socialism,” prevailing in Poland in the 1970s and early 1980s. Interestingly, this is the only dystopian state, portrayed in Polish cinema, which is governed by women. In Szulkin’s films oppression is always executed by men, and women are their victims. Again, it conveys the power relations in the communist state, where despite the language of gender equality, women were politically and culturally marginalised.

At the same time Szulkin and Machulski suggest that in a "mature" dystopia, the authorities are almost redundant as agents of oppression because ordinary people tyrannise each other simply out of habit or inertia (Przylipek 1988; Pawlicki 1985: 9). All relations are based on power, and equality and solidarity are regarded as a sign of strangeness, even madness. Mariola Jankun, discussing *War of the Worlds - Next Century*, compares reality represented in this film with that depicted by Tadeusz Borowski, famous for his portrayal of life in the Nazi concentration camps (Jankun 1984: 17). This is encapsulated by an early scene in *War of the Worlds* when one man leads another on a leash, like a master his dog.

The suffocating character of the dystopian world is conveyed visually. Outdoor space, as Mariola Jankun observes, is always enclosed by walls, bars, scaffolding, police cars - it feels like an enormous prison (Jankun 84: 15). Streets are typically blind or closed by the police, so there is no chance to escape. The houses and other buildings are furnished with cameras or guarded, excluding intimacy and security.

Technology and material conditions of life

Technology, its potential to create good and evil is one of the major themes (if not simply the main theme) of the science fiction genre in the West (Sontag 1994; Shapiro 2002; Redmond 2003). This is also an important topic of Polish films, set in the future, although probably less crucial than the question of political organisation of the dystopian state. Western and Polish science fiction films differ in the dangers they identify in the development of technology. The former typically express anxiety about technology becoming autonomous and overpowering human beings. The latter, including the films discussed in this paper, convey a fear that technological development will not only fail to improve the quality of people's lives and to take them to a higher level of civilization, but that it will bring about regression, or progress in one area offset by relapse in another, more important field and consequently destroy the existing culture and nature.

The most blatant way to illustrate this fear is by using the motif of nuclear war in three out of five films discussed here. The nuclear bomb is a technological achievement of a sort, as its destructive force has no equal in human history. Yet, from a human point of view, it brings only negative consequences. In the films by Szulkin and Machulski the earth after nuclear war is practically uninhabitable and the human population is decimated: in *O-bi, O-ba* it consists of less than a thousand people. More importantly, these people in most aspects of their lives are not progressing, but are taken back in time, often becoming mentally and physically degenerated; a large proportion of characters in Szulkin's films are blind or mad (features to which I will return in due course). Their degeneration is conveyed by the very titles of Szulkin's films - *O-bi, O-ba and Ga, Ga* sound like words from the vocabulary of a toddler or a seriously retarded man. The human regression takes place because development of destructive technologies happens at the expense of inventing, or even preserving earlier "human-friendly" devices. As a consequence, the quality of life of ordinary people is very low. People spend most of their time trying to fulfil their most basic needs, such as finding food and staying warm. Distribution of goods dominates over their production; we see long queues of men and women awaiting their daily rations of low quality food, while factories stay in disuse. A market economy is largely replaced by the black market: trading in scarce goods for inflated prices. The shortage of basic commodities lowers the value of art and high culture and undermines human dignity. In the world described by Szulkin people hardly produce or consume art and those who do are regarded as nutty. Books and objects of art are typically abandoned or treated as rubbish. Moreover, prostitutes offer their services for as little as a tin of meat and previously decent people are prepared to betray or spy on their friends and relatives for a biscuit; this motif is foreground in *O-bi, O-ba* and *Ga, Ga*. All these features of economy and technology of the future, as portrayed in the films, can be regarded as perfectly capturing life in a communist country whose economy was often described as "standing on its head" (Pawlicki 1995: 9).

The goods which are still produced are usually the output of recycling the products from the pre-dystopian times. The rule is that products of high quality and for more sophisticated use are transformed into more basic goods. For example, in *O-bi, O-ba* books are pulped into unappealing food for hungry masses and airplanes melted into simple coins. The original objects from the earlier epochs: tinned meat in *O-bi, O-ba*, real fruit and vegetables (as opposed to synthetic, plastic food) in *Sex Mission* are regarded as real treasures. Sometimes they are also forbidden, presumably because the authorities do not want people to compare the present with the past, as it will show the current reality in a very unfavourable light. Low quality of life is exacerbated by mindless destruction, undertaken by the police and the army, as well as by ordinary people who are influenced by the general atmosphere of hopelessness and disorder.

Due to the minimal production and low quality of goods which are still produced, past human achievements often feature prominently in the dystopian landscape, leading to stylistic hybridisation. For example, the hotel visited by the main character in *O-bi, O-ba* is built in the style of Art Nouveau, and is decorated with sculptures which look like ancient Greek statues. In this respect *O-bi, O-ba* is reminiscent of many postmodern science fiction films, most notably Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), where epochs and cultures are also mixed. In both films this feature suggests the exhaustion of culture, the end of history or even the reverse of historical process. The difference between, on the one hand, Scott's dystopia and Szulkin's on the other in regard to recycling, lies in its scale and results. In *Blade Runner* the consequences of reworking and mixing different past cultural forms are often stunning - it is postmodernism at its best and most grandiose. Take, for example, the pyramid-like buildings featured in *Blade Runner*. By contrast, recycling in Szulkin's films is always a "cottage industry," with no chance to produce anything grand or new, but resulting in lowering the standards. Again, the difference can be interpreted as an indication of the technological gap between capitalism and socialism.

Another technological achievement, alongside the nuclear bomb, represented as utterly negative from a moral perspective is genetic engineering and more widely, experiments on the human body, particularly the brain and reproductive system, portrayed in *Golem* and *Sex Mission*. People who experience genetic manipulation, such as Pernat in *Golem*, are not only less happy than those who preserved their genetic characteristics, but they also lose their memory, and therefore their identity. Women in *Sex Mission* who live in a female only environment, due to the introduction of a method to procreate girls using in vitro fertilisation, which eliminated men completely from the process of natural reproduction, are lacking sexual/ erotic desire. This lack, in the eyes of the two males who accidentally enter this world, is the ultimate testimony to their impaired humanity.



Figure 1: *Sex Mission* (Dir: Juliusz Machulski, 1983)

The remnants of religion

None of the previously existing religions survived the nuclear catastrophe, as represented by Szulkin and Machulski. Similarly, the society colonised by the aliens is nominally secular - not unlike a typical communist society. However, those populating Szulkin's and Machulski's dystopias are not free from quasi-religious beliefs and rituals. The faith in supernatural forces often appears to be even stronger than in the time before disaster, which can be explained by people's despair: lacking the means to help themselves, the inhabitants of the dystopia turn to God or god-like creatures to aid them (Szyma 1985). For example, in *O-bi, O-ba*, the survivors of the nuclear war believe that they will be rescued by an ark, sent by a higher civilization from space. The idea of an ark was first planted into their minds by their leaders, who in this way managed to persuade them to move into the dome. However, when the fiction of the ark was eventually

revealed, it did not make any difference - the vast majority of people continued to believe in the benevolent guests from space and prepared for their arrival. It must be remembered here that in the Bible the ark was not sent by God but built by Noah, acting according to the rule that God helps those who help themselves. The fact that the inhabitants of the dome do not attempt to build their own ark demonstrates their passivity and helplessness, as well as testifies to the material poverty of their lives. When Soft, one of the characters in *Ga, Ga* eventually tries to build the ark, he discovers that there is nobody willing to join him in this pursuit and nothing with which to build it.

Another reason why religion failed to disappear in dystopia is a desire of their inhabitants to preserve some privacy and intellectual freedom in a state which attempts to control everything. This refers to the television presenter Iron Idem in *War of the Worlds*, who visits an empty church and hides in the confessional, as it seems to be the only place in his city where there are no cameras peering at people continuously and therefore a place where one can preserve one's privacy. Unfortunately, the confessional contains a television set, screening his own appearance as if mocking him. The search for religion results also from the wish of ordinary people to make contact with an entity which is more mighty than the oppressors. Hence, private religion can be regarded as a form of rebellion against the status quo.

At the same time, the political leaders, aware of the power religion exerts over the masses, utilise and transform religious rituals to strengthen their influence on their subjects. For example, public meetings are reminiscent of religious masses, their purpose is to put their participants in a state of trance, when rationality is switched off and all sorts of ideas can be planted in their heads. In *Ga, Ga* the highest form of entertainment is the public impalement of three men, apparently guilty of some hideous crimes, which is reminiscent of the crucifixion of Jesus and the two bandits. Moreover, invaders and political leaders prefer not to reveal themselves to the people, but like gods, remain mysterious, impenetrable, hidden in remote places. In the relationship of the leaders to those who have direct access to them, special forms of address are introduced to emphasize the distance between them.

The use of religion by both the oppressed and the oppressors can also be regarded as testimony to the exhaustion of culture. I refer to the fact that instead of inventing new religions (or new forms of dealing with unhappiness) people turn to old holy books, typically the Bible. They pray and wait for a new Messiah or an ark. In this respect Polish films are not very different from their Western counterparts, where Biblical motives were also extensively used (Ćwikiel 1984, Sontag 1994, Shapiro 2002; Redmond 2003), an example is *The Terminator* (1984), directed by James Cameron.

The role of the media

The media and television in particular play a crucial role in the running of the dystopian universe. Firstly, they are a source of information for citizens, however partial and twisted. In *War of the Worlds* the viewers learn from television about the invasion of their planet by Martians and what they are expected to do in the new situation. In *Sex Mission* television is the means through which inhabitants of the female state find out about the unwelcome presence of two men from a different universe. Secondly, the media educate and indoctrinate the masses in a spirit which enhances the authority of the masters, and discourages dissent. Often it means simply lying to the viewers. In *War of the Worlds*, contrary to the experience of ordinary people, whose houses are destroyed by the police and the Martians, television maintains that the invaders are the humans' best friends.

The media are also used by the political leaders to convince their subjects about their existence and authority. One can guess that the direct contact with the masses will be impractical and even dangerous for those in power. Another use of the media is that of surveillance. Television and computer screens installed in private flats, offices and on space ships monitor the movements of the inhabitants and instruct them what to do. They can also be found in the streets where they ensure that the curfew and other oppressive rules are diligently obeyed by the masses. In order to perform these functions effectively, the screens are never switched off, thus becoming the most "faithful" companions of the people, who are otherwise fragmented and distanced from each other. This adds to the sense of unreality, experienced by the inhabitants of the dystopian world. Often, when the truth is eventually revealed to them either by the lonely heroes who defy the images manufactured in the television studios, or by the oppressors themselves, it does not make any real difference to the masses - they are so conditioned by the media that they ignore the facts.



Figure 2: *Golem* (Dir. Piotr Szulkin, 1979)

Another important function of the media is that of entertainment. This aspect is foreground in *Ga, Ga* and *War of the Worlds*, where entertainment is depicted as utterly populist, eclectic and fragmented, reminiscent of the bad taste of Polish television shows of the 1970s and 1980s. The staple diet of television entertainment included dancing by sparsely clad girls, performances by pop groups and the primitive jokes of show hosts. Usually the venues of such performances were large stadiums, where thousands of people could enjoy live performances alongside millions in front of the television screens. By doing it this way the organisers drew attention to the realism of the show and demonstrated its democratic character. The same characteristics apply to television shows in Szulkin's films, although their versions are more exaggerated, on an even larger scale in bad taste. What is utterly new in Szulkin's vision of the future of the media in comparison with Polish television of the 1970s and 1980s is the prominence given to what is currently described as "reality shows." In *War of the Worlds* their twisted relation to reality is conveyed by the slogan "Reality - we create it." Usually the reality shows are very exploitative and cruel - discomfort, shame and suffering of the performers constitutes the main source of entertainment for the audience. Take *Ga, Ga* whose narrative is centred around the spectacle of impaling two men in front of the live and television audiences.

The language of the media is full of words with twisted meanings and oxymorons. For example, the unfortunate men, sentenced to public execution in *Ga, Ga*, are called by the organisers of the shows "the heroes." For this reason, as well as thanks to the omnipresence and intrusiveness of the media, combined with the diminished scope for ordinary human contact, the difference between truth and reality in the future world disappears. For many people, spectacle become more important than the reality, television and radio announcements more truthful than what they hear and see directly. On some occasions it is suggested that the media gained autonomy - that television and computer screens, not real people are in charge of political affairs (Janicka 1983: 9). It can be said that the world depicted in Polish films is Baudrillardian, with the difference that Baudrillard allowed people to switch off the media (Baudrillard 1985), while in Szulkin's and Machulski's films this opportunity is denied. In Szulkin's films the omnipresence of the media and their deciding role in blurring the division between truth and falseness is conveyed by the visual style and narrative structure of his films, especially in *Golem* and *War of the Worlds*. The look of many episodes, set in the "real world" remind us of the style of television news or reports, thanks to the use of grainy images and hand-held camera. Individual scenes are often separated by images which are seen on the television screen when there are disturbances. Furthermore, Szulkin switches from colour to black and white and uses fast motion, to suggest that what we see was staged for the camera and previously recorded. In addition, the narrative of *War of the Worlds* is fragmented, reminding us of a succession of television programmes.

Television is criticised by Szulkin more than any other institution of dystopian future (Pawlukiewicz 1984). Those of his characters who are able to think in a critical way, such as Pernat in *Golem* and Iron Idem in *War of the Worlds* regard it as an instrument which makes people a passive and obedient crowd. In *War of the Worlds* it is described contemptuously as "a glass condom which gives a man an easy pleasure but can not fertilise him." Szulkin's recognition of the importance of television in shaping human outlook on life and his harsh criticism of this medium parallels the discussion of its role which took place in Poland in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At the time its growing power, the low quality of the programmes and their inauthentic character were summarised by the slogan "television stupefies" (*telewizja oglupia*).

Lost in the inhuman world

Although Szulkin and Machulski attempt to reveal the mechanisms of the oppressive state, their ultimate goal is to show how an individual copes with the dystopian reality. Before I answer this question it is worth mentioning that a typical protagonist of the discussed films is an atypical member of the dystopian community. He might be an visitor from a different world, which is the case of the two main characters in *Sex Mission* who came to the matriarchal society of the future from the patriarchal past, having hibernated several decades before, and Scope in *Ga, Ga* who was sent in a rocket from Earth to a planet named "Australia 458." The main characters in *War of the Worlds* and *O-bi, O-ba* differ from the masses by having a relatively high position in the social hierarchy, they somehow mediate between the leaders and the ordinary people. The extraordinariness of some protagonists also results from being, speaking metaphorically, in the eye of a cyclone. Iron Idem in the former film working as a television presenter of the news is meant to know more about social and political reality of his state than the majority of his compatriots. Soft's role in *O-bi, O-ba* is to police the minds of the inhabitants of the dome as he is a specialist in propaganda.

The members of the first group are hostile to the reality they enter from the very beginning and barely hide it. Their only objective is to escape and they succeed. Maks and Albert find their way to the surface of the Earth and discover that it is not contaminated any more; plants grow there and people can breathe easily. Scope boards his rocket with a young prostitute Once, with whom he has fallen in love, and flies away from Australia 458, possibly to a deserted, therefore more "human" planet. We are meant to believe that they will be the new Adam and Eve, beginning a less cruel race. It could be suggested that not being "from here" is the deciding factor in why they managed to escape - by coming from somewhere else they proved - at least to themselves - that there are different worlds in the cosmos than the one where they are stranded. By contrast, the native population of dystopia is so weakened by the despicable material and moral conditions of their existence that can not even envisage life somewhere else.

The members of the second group appear to go through a metamorphosis - from being ardent supporters of the status quo to becoming their leading critics, not unlike real political dissidents in communist Poland, examples are political trajectories of the most famous members of political opposition in the 1970s, Adam Michnik and Jacek Kuroń. Iron Idem starts to question the apparent perfection of the Earth dominated by Martians after being asked to read in front of the camera a message which is blatantly false. His questioning attitude changes into hatred when his flat is invaded by the police and the Martians, who demolish his possessions and abduct his wife. From then, if he conforms to the demands of the regime, it is only to get back his wife. This strategy, however, proves unsuccessful - eventually he finds out that his wife has been killed. He, on the other hand, takes part in a fake trial, accused of collaborating with Martians (by then denounced as acting against human interests), and in a fake execution, staged especially to be shown on television. In reality, he survives, but this does not matter for ordinary people - they only care about what is shown on television. Neither does it give Iron Idem any sense of victory or consolation. On the contrary, he feels defeated as he realizes that he has been unable either to convey his views to his compatriots or to find any escape route or safe haven for himself.

The main reason why Soft becomes a dissident appears to be his growing exasperation with the dirt, discomfort, poverty and hunger which surround him and disillusionment with the ability of his superiors to change the conditions of life of those who are imprisoned in the dome. The main difference between Iron Idem and Soft lies in the fact that from the very beginning nobody really minds whether Soft believes in any official ideology. His superiors are as disillusioned and pessimistic about the future of the dome and the Earth as he is. I will suggest that it metaphorically conveys the political situation in Poland in the middle of the 1980s when deep crisis affected the ideology of socialism. The fact was that not only did ordinary people lack faith

in it, but the political leaders also gave the impression of supporting the status quo out of sheer opportunism or the inability to find a solution to the crisis. The comical figure of Her Highness, the charismatic leader of the all-female state in *Sex Mission* conforms to this image of a leader of a communist state who does not believe in communism. Although she is regarded as the most zealous feminist of all, in reality she not only does not identify with feminist ideology, but is in fact a man, who uses female disguise to conceal his true identity and views.

A large proportion of the secondary characters included in the films by Szulkin and even Machulski cope with the cruel and incomprehensible reality by becoming mad. Madness is a strategy of moral survival precisely because it allows those affected by it to detach themselves from the surrounding world and look inwards. In Szulkin's own words, madness is the way to remain free in a world where conformity is the norm (Filmowy Serwis Prasowy 1981: 10). However, there is a high price to pay for achieving freedom in such a way: those who become mad, though they might be happier than the rest of the population, are also the first to die, because they have lost their ability to fight for material goods essential for day to day survival. On the other hand, it does not really matter to them as they regard death as a better solution than surviving in a dystopian world.

Way out?

Judging from the films' endings, dystopia of the sort represented in the movies discussed in this paper cannot be improved, or evolve into something less sinister, or provide a new beginning to a positive state of affairs. It can only proceed into an ultimate catastrophe (Szyma 1985). The only exception is *Sex Mission*, which can be explained by its generic specificity - being a comedy. In its pessimism Polish dystopia bears affinity with many literary and cinematic dystopias, created in the second half of the 20th century. Vita Fortunati's analysis of the novels of J. G. Ballard, regarded as the leading author representing this attitude to the future, also captures perfectly the spirit pervading Szulkin's world: "All of his tales are marked by a horrifying admission that humanity essentially yearns for Apocalypse, that it feeds upon disaster, that it actually pursues its own death, its total annihilation. In such a perspective, any argument for regeneration is quite clearly impossible, not least because Ballard's characters consciously deny the possibility. The Apocalypse is no longer feared; it is *desired*. It is no longer fought against; it is embraced. It has become a goal, an ambition, a means to fulfilment" (Fortunati 1993: 88).

However, it must be emphasized that the main reason in the Polish films why the Apocalypse is no longer fought against, is the fact that the bulk of the potential fighters are extremely tired and have lost any hope of victory. They prefer the end of the world to preserving the status quo. From the perspective of the few individuals, like Scope in *Ga, Ga* who did not give up on the chance of a better life, the only solution is individualistic - escaping to a far off planet. Hence, the words of Antonio Gramsci: "the old is dying and the new cannot be born," excellently suit the situation depicted. Again, it can be read as an artist's sour commentary on the socialist reality, which at the time Szulkin made his films, was widely regarded as unreformable.

Parochial or universal?

The ultimate question of my paper is: are Polish cinematic dystopias "parochial" or "universal"? I will suggest that they are both, reflecting the particular problems of the communist state in its final, decadent period and conveying some concerns and anxieties typical of many contemporary societies of different socio-political systems, especially the loss of faith in progress. However, despite capturing the popular mood of Polish society in the period the films were made, they proved to be unable to predict the future of Poland. Only four years after Szulkin made his most pessimistic film: *O-bi, O-ba. The End of Civilization*, the society abandoned communism and embarked on a new political and social "journey." Moreover, it happened not because it was saved by any "ark" coming from a distant civilization, but because of the determination, courage and energy of ordinary Polish people themselves. It is worth adding that present day Poland is also far from utopian, but so far there is no new Polish science fiction to depict it, probably because there is no reason to hide the truth about the status quo behind any elaborate metaphor.



Figure 3: *War of the Worlds* (Dir. Piotr Szulkin, 1981)



Figure 4: *O-bi, O-ba: The End of Civilization* (Dir. Piotr Szulkin, 1985)

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson claims that dystopias were used as political metaphors more often than utopias because “anti-Utopianism constitutes a far more easily decodable and unambiguous political position than its utopian Other” (Jameson 1988: 76).

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