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The presented article is an attempt to interpret the historical phenomenon of VHS during the economic transformation in Poland. This technology is understood here as an ideological complex, which functioned on three levels: content distributed on videotapes, a business model, and an offer directed to a broad audience. Through films distributed on tape, VHS was a medium of capitalist realism: it showed capitalist social formation as a background for the way in which individuals experience their lives. VHS was also a transitory phenomenon: as a technology, medium of specific content, and practice it has lost popularity towards the end of the phase of capitalism, with which it was tied.

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VHS and the Transitional Phase of Polish Capitalism

I use the word "VHS" as a collective name for a whole ideological complex. The video technology known as VHS constituted a certain kind of representation, a form for the production, replication and distribution of content, and, finally, a market of sorts, one that experienced its own periods of growth and decline. It is a distinct phenomenon that belongs to a certain historically "marked off" era. While it is difficult to determine its exact beginning and end, the period may safely be described as lasting from the mid-80s to the latter half of the 90s. VHS arrived in Poland at almost the same time as economic liberalization, and its decline coincided with the emergence of cable television on the Polish market and the simultaneous popularization of digital technology, both of which significantly changed media. There is thus a telling overlap between the heyday of VHS and a certain period in the history of capitalism in Poland: its disorganized phase, during which new rules were written and it appeared that a certain space for opportunity had opened up.

I would describe VHS as above all a transitional technology: this analogue device is now a nostalgic artefact from a time before what may be termed *technological modernity*. In its day, VHS might have been perceived as one of the revolutionary pieces of capitalist technology:[1] it enabled individual patterns of behaviour, manipulation and, more importantly, the independent editing of content, e.g. by combining different shows on a single tape. It also allowed the user to engage in entirely new practices such as repeated watching of recorded content and sharing, via copying of, the recordings. At the same time, all these options must seem remarkably limited from the perspective of today's digital revolution which has made it possible to intervene directly in all elements of the message and to easily copy and share

content. This of course does not mean that VHS was "less developed" or worse than the technology that came after it, nor does it mean that VHS was merely a rung in a ladder of evolution. What I describe as the "transitional" quality of VHS is associated with the historical nature of a certain piece of technology that took over the market at one point, only to become a social anachronism within the space of two decades. The aging of technology is, in this case, part of the historical circumstances being interpreted. From this perspective, it is an important motif that deserves theoretical attention, in contrast to nostalgic perspectives on VHS that merely serve to reproduce its timeless charm. VHS has become a worthless piece of technology and its status as garbage or detritus is precisely what makes it an excellent symbol of the "commodity logic" of late capitalism.



At another level VHS as an analogue technology assumed (or perhaps made possible) the existence of a market made of many actors – from distributors to myriad middlemen. This business stands in complete contrast to that of cable TV providers, to say nothing of digital television platforms and corporations that sell digital content online. A certain number of key organisations were required for a VHS cassette to reach its audience. These included a Polish distributor with the necessary technological resources (a cassette duplication facility, legal or otherwise), a regional distributor, a video rental store or music store and a local electronics shop which bore no resemblance to large-format electronics retailers. Not only were these business models accessible to Polish entrepreneurs, but they were definitive of this period of capitalism in Poland: the period of accumulation, in which small amounts of capital had to be supplemented

with individual mobility and faith in the opportunities offered by the market. Compared to these networks of individual businessmen, digital television platforms are more akin to corporations. With their complex management structures and distinctive business culture, the latter kind of organization have more in common with the financial market than with "trade" in the traditional sense.

VHS thus provides a perfect way to periodize Polish capitalism: VHS involves the distribution of content on cassette tapes, is associated with a specific form of technology and it is tied to a certain economic model. In this sense, it provides all the "moments" required for a materialist periodization.[2] As I will attempt to demonstrate in this article, VHS is at the same time an ideological phenomenon, if, as Fredric Jameson argues, the discussion of ideology necessitates a conversation about both concepts and realities.[3]

Ideology is a kind of "program" of content and ideas, images and afterimages, but it is also a model of action, one that is practiced at a specific time and thus carries some expectations about what is and what is not possible. Ideology is something we discover, in the sense that it is a way of seeing the world. It is something providing pleasure (as representation, narrative, a play on signifiers that correspond to our own phantasmatic narratives). It is something that we experience (e.g. as our own stories of success or failure), but also something that we recreate through our own actions, something we practice (in our relationships with others). Ideology is inscribed into practices, objects, relationships (e.g. between social actors) and structures of behaviour. Individual sections of this article will correspond to these various levels of the phenomenon of VHS as ideology.[4] That said, many of the observations made below should be regarded as parts of an outline for a more thorough study that,

in my opinion, VHS as an ideological complex deserves.

The Content: Capitalist Realism

VHS is not a transparent tool or technology. In the historical (rather than ideal) sense, VHS was not purely a technological possibility, but the realization of a certain definite – and thus limited – content. That is not to say that this content can be easily and precisely named. The proper interpretation of this "aspect of content" will require the concept of capitalist realism, specifically in the sense proposed by Mark Fisher meaning "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."[5] Fisher's definition is based on another quote by Fredric Jameson (as he himself admits, but without providing its exact wording or source): "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism."[6] According to Jameson, this particular way of thinking is associated with a specific moment in history, namely the third stage of capitalism in which the system has become universally accepted as the sole mode of production in the world, eliminating the remains of previous social formations along with their temporalities and ways of thinking.

Jameson's statement is well known and seems obvious enough, but some effort is required to transcribe it onto the problem of representation without causing misunderstanding. If we understand "capitalist realism" in the sense proposed by Jameson (and Fisher), then it should not be confused in particular with a specific (in terms of content) expression of preference for the capitalist system, nor with a depiction of an idealized version of capitalism, nor even with the choice of capitalism as the "topic." In fact, it is worth considering whether capitalism can even be depicted in any coherent and sensible manner if it is an all-encompassing and largely naturalized social

formation. Can it be described in any other way than through one-sided and fragmented elements, ones that can only be assembled into an imperfect allegory that is outdated as soon as it is articulated? Just think how inadequately capitalism is addressed by narratives in which it is the central topic such as Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) and Martin Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).

Capitalist realism thus has more to do with treating the capitalist social formation as place in which something occurs, particularly as a stage where phantasmatic narratives are played out: both those depicting wish fulfilment and those dealing with individual failures or more "global" catastrophes. Unexpectedly juxtaposed within the same concept are fantasies about something happening and the impossibility of actual change: in capitalist realism these same market realities are a space in which our individual desires and fears are played out; and a space that sets the boundaries of what is possible, a synonym for the impossibility of change on another, historical or political, level. Market realities are a space for individual action and an obstacle to social action.



How are we to understand this duality? Firstly, late capitalism has historically described itself as a natural and realistic system, as opposed to the spectre of "socialism," a synonym of that which is unnatural and doomed to failure. Jameson suggestively illustrates this opposition by using the images of cities as examples: the capitalist city "legitimizes itself" as a space of opportunity, chance and abundance, in contrast to the socialist city, a thoroughly planned and predictable space devoid of any libidinal gratification.[7]

Yet that same late capitalism also coincides with the "end of

history," or the final relegation of all social alternatives to the dust heap of history. Jameson describes this pole of the impossibility of historical change elsewhere as "stasis,"[8] which can be interpreted literally, but which also carries connotations associated with "crystallization" and even necrosis, as in the Freudian definition of the death drive which describes matter as striving to return to its immobile, inanimate state.

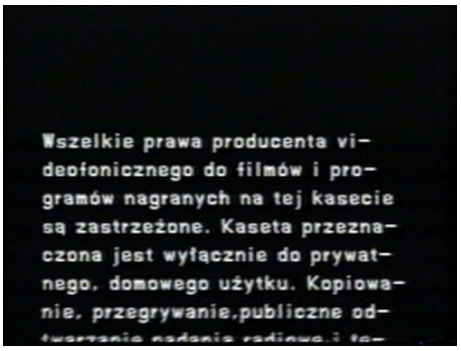
So capitalism, as Marx posited, remains a formation of animate and constant change,[9] or even a privileged stage of individual activity and agency, but with one crucial exception: any activity that that leads to systemic change. In other words, the mobility of all guarantees that the system itself will remain intact. The only spaces not encompassed by capitalism are those that are excluded from history, places inhabited by "populations" rather than individuals.

There is one more element that I would like to add to the description of capitalist realism as understood here, one proposed by Jameson in his analysis of the 19th century novel. That is the fantasy of wish fulfilment, which, if it is to be satisfying, must be plausible; thus there must be obstacles in the way of the ultimate fulfilment. A sense of reality, when engaged in the process of fantasizing, may ultimately place the story and gratification at odds.[10] Notice that, in this manner, the subject who renounces wish fulfilment in a fantasy does not renounce another source of satisfaction: the pleasure that stems from the very act of fantasizing, a pleasure that is greater, the more meticulously reality is accounted for in the development of the wish fulfilment scenario.

These observations are key to the understanding of capitalist realism as I explore it in this article. As mentioned above, capitalist realism, to be effective, does not require a positive image of capitalism. On the contrary, the logic of fantasy allows it to be placed in a world that is far from ideal. The true issue lies elsewhere: capitalist realism is a system of representation

that establishes the "capitalist social world" as a phantasmatic scene of events. Whether it is a maniacal fantasy about the triumph of the subject or a narcissistic fantasy about noble failure in the struggle against the world is a secondary matter to the actual construction of the fantasy scene as a place in which it is possible to experience one's own fate in an individualized and libidinously stimulating manner. This will be crucial to the discussion of the characteristic shift observed in the distribution of films on VHS: their meaning in their country of origin is different than that in the country of import. An image that evokes associations with urban monotony or decadence (e.g. images of metropolitan nightlife depicted in a crime film or thriller) can, in another context, fascinate the viewer, enticing him with something that is alien to his own experience.

The Polish VHS market facilitated the large scale import of American movies[11], giving individual viewers broad access to hundreds and thousands of films that had never been screened (or had never been widely screened) in cinemas. It was not just specific movies that were being imported, but also a certain way of thinking about cinema that was typical for the United States. Genre films constituted a relatively small portion of Polish mainstream film production which was geared more towards original titles that were seen as the work of a single auteur or, less commonly, a film crew. In the case of films imported on VHS, the proportions were reversed: the prevailing logic was that of the genre.[12] Other criteria by which a film was evaluated included its cast and the size of its budget. This, of course, is not to say that "art house" or "auteur" films did not make the cut; however, they were not the prevailing type of film imported at the time.[13]



This fact is apparent in the divisions that existed among distributors: large, stable Polish distributors like ITI, Vision, Best Film and NVC, with relatively large capital resources and good international agreements, imported high-budget titles. Smaller distributors (including Video Rondo, El-Gaz, Telehit, Hit of Poland, VIM) were left with large numbers of low-budget titles, including straight-to-TV movies. All of these distributors, large or small, dealt in what were essentially genre films.

A large portion of these productions did not present an idealized view of the capitalist world: among some of the more popular titles of the period are narratives critical of class divisions in the US (*Trading Places*, 1983) and of corporate culture (*Robocop*, 1987). Entire genres of American film – including thrillers set in big cities, mob films and police dramas – are by definition ambivalent about the American way of life and the back room dealings of the government (see, for example, Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather III*, 1990 and Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America*, 1984). Their reception in a specific historical context (in the case of Poland, the late 1980s and early 90s) was inevitably associated with a shift that removed the given narrative from its original context and distorted its content. In this sense, while Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* is mostly a brilliant pastiche on the American version of neoliberalism,[14] and was innovative and surprisingly accurate in its predictions for the future (especially with regard to its criticism of the privatization of the public security industry), these particular aspects of the content must have been less comprehensible in the Polish context.

In a similar way, the associations related to individual actors were difficult to interpret in a Polish context. Eddie Murphy, who

was popular at the time, began his career as a stand-up comedian with a routine that criticized the racial divisions and social policies of the United States under Ronald Reagan. Murphy performed in TV shows such as *Saturday Night Live*. These subtle messages may have been clear to the American viewers of comedies such as *48 Hours* (1982) or *Trading Places* (mentioned above), but they were certainly less transparent in Poland.

Rather than conveying these specific meanings, all these films were, for Polish people at the time, undoubtedly marked by an unspecified, quasi-mythical Americanness: the advanced technology depicted in sci-fi films, the world of big cities with their nocturnal temptations and decadent appeal, as seen in thrillers and crime movies, the commanding presence of the characters in mob films (in which both the gangsters and law enforcement officers "mean something" as individuals), and the klutzy charm and democratic style of comedy characters (Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor in *See No Evil, Hear No Evil*, 1989, or the class boundary-crossing duos in the comedy *Look Who's Talking*, 1989, and the crime movie *Tango and Cash*, 1989). All of these features could literally be consumed as elements of a different, capitalist lifestyle. This of course is merely an assumption about how the original reception of these films, but it is an assumption based on clear differences in the social experiences of late capitalism and real socialism and, consequently, differences in perspectives. This interpretation is also suggested by a characteristic hunger for capitalist aesthetic, signs of which can be found in a number of social documents, for example the photographs of Zofia Rydet.[15] Rydet visited Polish homes and documented the various ways in which the packaging of Western products would be reused as decoration (typical examples included empty cigarette boxes pinned to cork boards and collections of alcoholic beverage containers). A similar sign can be discerned in Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Decalogue IV* (1988), whose set designers decorated the wall of

a young girl's room with wallpaper made out of a large-format ad poster.

The mass importation of American films (the overwhelming majority of the distributed titles, witness the industry magazines published in the late 90s) served as an ideological machine that taught viewers to locate their own personal fantasies in the capitalist world. Other elements that were characteristic of the feature film ideology of American cinema simply happened to fall on fertile ground in conditions where growing competition coincided with the brutalization of social life. The main individualist themes found in American film -– the individual vs. a corrupt institution or a conspiracy that threatens to undermine democratic ideals or vigilante justice - are a part of the time-honoured arsenal of American populism.[16] The fact that Polish films of that period copied similar ideas shows just how captivating these themes were to local audiences, and it was immediately recognized as an American influence at the time: particularly successful examples include *Kroll* (1991), *Psy* [Dogs] (1992) and *Psy 2: Ostatnia krew* [Dogs 2: Last Blood] (1994).

The Business Model: Enthusiasts

The extraordinary nature of VHS as a historical complex stems from, among other things, the striking parallels observed between different levels of the phenomenon at hand. While VHS was a medium for capitalist realism in terms of its content, it also created, at another level, a space for "private initiative," making it relatively easy for prospective entrepreneurs to start the businesses of their dreams – on a scale that was attainable for the Poland of the time, of course. Simply by opening a video rental store, one could become a kind of local film distributor. In this manner, VHS shaped a certain number of individuals who adopted the attitudes and practices typical of private business

owners.



The extraordinarily dynamic VHS market underwent rapid transformation: from under-the-counter distribution of (frequently pirated) content, through the establishment of the first legitimate distributors, to the gradual consolidation of the market. In its heyday, VHS technology was widely available in Poland: studies of home appliance ownership conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) showed that 30% of households owned a VHS recorder in 1992, with that number rising to 59% in 1998. The percentage has remained stable since 1999, but the relevance of the factor has diminished: "VHS recorder" was dropped from the list of devices available for respondents to choose from in research in 2011.[17] Close to 60% of all households owned a VHS recorder at the point of peak market saturation; this is not to say that around 40% lacked the device but wished to own one: some respondents may not have considered it desirable. So in the 90s, the VHS industry comprised several dozen distribution companies, some of them short-lived,[18] several thousand video rental stores, and over ten million potential customers. This offered enormous opportunities to those enthusiasts who, like the head of one of these companies, were ready to look after the entire business: selecting the films, managing press relations and, "when necessary," "manning the register."[19]

The owners of the distribution company EUROKADR discussed their business in a 1992 interview:

Artur Kowalczyk: "(...) the days of taking a few million [Polish złoty] of savings and opening a video rental store in your basement are long gone. Any professional, financially-stable shop will have 1,000 to 1,500 titles on the shelves, plus additional

products like your own magazine. It'll buy at least 70 titles per month and serve 800 customers.

Krzysztof Rogoziński: Now you have one big shop where you used to have five small ones. But we don't see that as a threat: the big ones buy and will continue to buy 2–3 copies of each title.

AK: The industry is just sorting itself out, that's all."[20]

The size of the businesses discussed in the interview is interesting in itself: a "stable" video rental store has "1,000 to 1,500 titles on the shelves" along with 800 customers. One can easily surmise that there must have been several dozen such shops in the main city of each administrative region or voivodship (prior to the local government reforms).[21] The video rental store was a venture tailored to the capabilities of the aspiring businessman: from a "basement" operation to a rental store that embodied the petit bourgeois dream of luxury. One news report described a video rental store in downtown Chorzów as having "floors covered with beige ceramic tiles, polystyrene tiles hanging from the ceiling, and shelves mounted on white walls. And, in the middle, a fountain decorated with mirrored tiles."[22]

In the issue of the industry magazine *Cinema Press Video* quoted above, a VHS market observer notes that the periodical publishes 200 new film reviews each month.[23] According to the author of the editorial in the November 1994 issue, the estimated monthly viewership of an "average" VHS film was one hundred thousand.[24] These estimates are not precise, as they are based on the highly subjective category of the "average film," which is somewhere between a blockbuster and the numerous minor titles published by small companies, but are nevertheless relevant in that they illustrate the scale of the VHS industry at its height.

The VHS business was equally interesting from the perspective of distributors. Excellent source material can be found in a highly optimistic presentation on the company VIM, titled "The Future is at Stake," published in the company's own magazine, *Video Fan*.[25]

The feature tells a typical capitalist success story that starts with three video rental stores, the owners of which decide to pool their capital and know-how. The businessmen toiled to find reliable Western partners who, in turn, were wary about accepting "payment in Polish złoty or crops." It was a very difficult market to operate in, one in which "those with the best knowledge of the business, the quickest access to new information and the ability to make fast decisions" were the most successful.[26]

This characterization of successful businessmen was intended to be reflected in the photos illustrating the article. The founders of the company pose inside their headquarters: white walls, a massive black desk and leather office chairs. The surface of the desk is strewn with promotional material: mainly video cassette covers, arranged in a manner that was intended to appear haphazard, but allowed the reader to see which blockbuster titles were in the company's catalogue, including *Highlander II: The Quickening* (1991), which also appears on a poster and a flier, and *Moon 44* (1990).

The subjects of the article and their competition are described as "lovers of film and cash."[27] This distinctive phrase is an important clue as to what makes the video distribution industry so paradigmatic of the new business model: it combines two kinds of ethos. The first is that of the parvenu and his typical respect for money. Notice that the author of the piece mentions a specific form of money, namely "cash." The imagination of these businessmen is fired not by complicated debt securities and their multi-tiered logic, but by the tangible elements of trade: the flow of cash and the middleman's profit, long considered to be the foundation of the profit mechanism. This ethos is at once the most appropriate for this early phase of the reintroduction of capitalism in Poland, with its romantic, petit-bourgeois approach to business on a "human" scale – where what matters is an individual's cleverness, work ethic and will – rather than the

economies of scale, with its iron-clad logic, where success is only attainable by those who have already achieved a certain level in the game.

On the other hand, not just anyone can make it in this business, one closely associated, after all, with the arts. One ITI employee recalls being hired based on such criteria as his "general knowledge, personal demeanour and appearance,"[28] which hints at the informal, quasi-class-based recruitment mechanisms that happen to resemble the above-mentioned practices involved in shaping the "new" capitalist person in Poland's transitional phase.[29] Yet these "lovers of cash" must possess another feature: they must be "lovers of film," which means that the fundamental criterion in their line of business is something as personal as taste. Naturally, this sense of taste is averaged out, objectified and geared towards selecting titles that will be appealing and intelligible to general audiences. What is intelligible and appealing, as I mentioned in the previous section, is the genre system with its standardized content and its categories of "high" and "low" quality movies: the former comprise high-budget films, while the latter are B movies with no recognizable cast members, typically made for TV. Such movies were often produced in their country of origin specifically with the home video market in mind.[30] This division is common to both distributors and reviewers in the industry press, who focus separately on the individual attractions provided by a title, such as the quality of the performance and the impressiveness of the special effects. This is a small-scale version of the logic employed by American film studios, which differentiate between flagship products (blockbusters) and low-budget "secondary" films, and A-list actors and "the rest."



Źródło: https://www.facebook.com/vhshell/

The films which local businessmen aspire to release are not cinematic masterpieces (a term that began to disappear from the vernacular at that time, giving way to the less distinct noun "classic"[31]), but top-shelf products, preferably the kind offered by Hollywood. Naturally, only a small number of large distributors ever achieve that goal; all that ambitious "small fry" can hope for is the occasional unexpected success, as with the made-for-TV family drama *Go Toward the Light* (1988), released by TOP VIDEO, the Wes Craven thriller *Flowers in the Attic* (1987, released by El-Gaz), or the anti-totalitarian dystopia of *Wedlock* (1991). VHS distributors speak openly in the industry press about the problems associated with the large number of "bad films" available on the Polish market: titles can only be purchased in bundles containing at most a few prospective winners, and small companies must first prove their reliability by releasing irrelevant films.[32] Notice, however, that because of the scale of production mentioned above – at least one hundred new titles every month – some of the B movies would go on to become hits. This romantic business model disappeared as the market became more organized and, more significantly, technology continued to develop. Video rental store owners and industry press publishers moved on to other businesses.[33] VHS, meanwhile, became an outdated technology and, later, an object of nostalgia, once the ways in which viewers accessed content had changed: the availability of digital films online turned the physical medium into something exotic. The "middleman", in the

market and technological sense was no longer necessary. The latest hits produced by the American entertainment industry had become available "on demand" (thanks to Internet piracy, at first, and later through services such as video on demand), in keeping with the model of instantaneity that is characteristic of late capitalism.[34]

The Viewers: Whatever's Popular

The appearance of the VHS market ushered in revolutionary changes in how viewers accessed films. First, as mentioned above, it introduced thousands of previously unavailable titles. Second, and more importantly, the distribution of these titles was ruled by market forces, rather than the selection model used in film distribution prior to 1989. Finally, VHS meant that movies could now be viewed in private, completely changing the way in which audiences interacted with the film medium, resulting in a model that was undoubtedly inferior from the standpoint of artistic purity.[35]

Interpretations of this phenomenon from the perspective of the audience are inherently associated with a dilemma that can be described in terms of an opposition between the popular and mass culture.[36] It should be emphasized that this newfound access to film is synonymous with the popularization of cinema in a new form. The "popular" side of the division also includes the freeing of viewers from the curatorship of the critics and government officials who once selected the repertoire, meaning that the emancipation of the audience's tastes was now being encouraged by market forces. Finally, this list includes new video viewing practices that emerged in this period, mainly cassette swapping and copying, watching movies with friends and family (which offered viewers a less restrictive environment than that of the "cinema" or "movie theatre," where loud commentary is frowned upon), lending films and visits to the local video rental store. This "privatized" perspective is just as social as the

previous cinema-based model, but does not require that the public sphere be mediated as such, thus limiting the influence of the myriad experts on aesthetics and good taste.

The "mass culture" half of the abovementioned opposition includes other phenomena. Most important among these is the involvement of market forces in the selection of the repertoire and the treatment of films themselves as commodities. "Good" and "bad," as used to describe films in the industry press, are not descriptions of individual taste, but are based on largely quantifiable indicators of a film product's quality, such as its budget or the stars cast in a given production. Another feature of VHS that can be listed on this – mass culture – side is the monotony of the repertoire, which encompassed a predictable set of genres, and titles produced mainly in one country: the United States.

Particularly informative data on the countries of origin of the films distributed in Poland can be found in the industry periodical "Cinema Press Video." The magazine's policy was to publish reviews of all the major films released on the Polish market and in 1991 the staff wrote an average of one hundred reviews per issue. My study of ten issues released in the title's first three years[37] revealed 705 reviews of titles released on VHS, out of which nearly one third (525) were films produced in the United States. The United Kingdom comes second with forty-three titles (many of which featured casts with actors that were "on loan" from Hollywood, which increased the attractiveness of these films in terms of the market criteria mentioned above). In contrast, these issues of the magazine included fourteen reviews of films from Poland and an equal number of movies from Hong Kong. The domination of the American model thus involved the popularization of a certain way of thinking as well as the literal "flooding" of the market with US-made films.

The issue of Americanization is a broader subject that complicates the above model, as it is located halfway

between the two poles of the popular and mass culture. It involves, on the one hand, a certain form of soft cultural imperialism that can be placed on the side of the division associated with commodification and mass culture: high-budget movies dominate, movies produced according to the most advanced business models, enabling the subjugation of smaller markets. On the other hand, the numerous associations evoked by the signifier "America," understood as an ideological resource that allows one to fantasize about one's own agency, belong to another context and are unquestionably popular. The broad range of popular films, not unlike the American TV shows broadcast in the same period, offered a sense of nostalgia for something that never existed in Poland, e.g. a childhood like the one depicted in *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993) and the small-town life of *Northern Exposure* (1990–1995).
This encouraged the normalization of a certain model of social relations associated with the (idealized or aestheticized) history of market societies and capitalism's core economy, rather than with Polish experience and the relations that were forged in post-war Poland. This allows the newly-emancipated individual to free himself from the national and historical context and serves as the base for a completely new type of imaginative figure, a completely new "self." It is another issue that this "self" is deracinated as much as she is emancipated: she becomes more confident in his own strength as much as he alienates himself and removes familiar points of support. Still, this is a more general problem of the ambivalence brought about by one's liberation from the local context.



Secondly, the mass–popular opposition is affected by shifts in the very dialectic of cinema, particularly the shift towards the broad category of popular film that occurred throughout the eighties with the emergence of "new adventure films"[38] and the renaissance of genres. It was at this time that Brian De Palma, David Cronenberg, John Carpenter and Abel Ferrara achieved the status of auteur filmmakers, though they rarely emerged from their genre ghettos and often intentionally aimed for aesthetics bordering the B movie. A similar mechanism appeared in Asian filmmaking, particularly in the Hong Kong crime films and wuxia movies that were available on the Polish VHS market. The broad landscape of the popular encompassed the overwhelming majority of relevant directors at the time (including many names associated with European art house cinema, such as Pedro Almodóvar, and the makers of French neon cinema) while both low and high budget productions followed similar genre guidelines.

It is worth mentioning that this popular film logic was reinforced by the conditions in which movies were produced and distributed: through many small companies producing relatively cheap films intended for the cable television and video markets. Most of these titles are now forgotten, though they once filled the shelves of video rental stores and are indeed becoming a point of reference for VHS nostalgia. These movie production conditions disappeared with the end of the 20th century: the 90s marked a period of consolidation among large players on the American market.[39] As a result, many independent and artistically ambitious studios shut down, together with a number of small companies that mass-produced cheap genre films. The strategies now employed by film studios have changed so much

that the pendulum is now swinging towards commodification, with astronomical budgets and an obsession with technical perfection (which sometimes manifests itself in amusing ways, one example being the snobbery that led P.T. Anderson and Quentin Tarantino to shoot movies on 70 mm film at a time when cinemas equipped with the appropriate projectors were practically non-existent). These shifts can be regarded as a change in the mass–popular opposition in a period overlapping with the history of VHS.

As mentioned above, the market society served as the stage of events for fantasies. It is worth specifying the meaning of the word "market" in this context. I have already discussed the petit-bourgeois nature of the VHS industry, a form of capitalism tailored to the ambitions of the individual. Can similar relations be observed on the part of the audience? One recollection from the VHS era I heard while writing this article was provided by a woman who frequented a local outdoor market with her older brother in the early 90s. The two would bring films that they had already watched to swap for new titles. As my source recalled, the whole challenge was to evaluate, based on scant information such as the title, country of production and genre, whether a film was "good" enough to warrant an exchange.

This anecdote illustrates one aspect of the commodification of film as a source of satisfaction, with the criteria of value appropriately averaged out strengthening the "mass" aspect. But what is also immediately apparent is the idealized nature of the "market" in which similar transactions take place. The objects exchanged are very similar and the risk is small, as is the informational asymmetry. This market closely resembles the model market, as does the view of business presented in the previous section of this article: a market that shares the small scale of a farmer's market rather than the alienating mechanisms employed by big business, and is thus in a sense

"popular" due to its ties to, and everyday interactions with, the local community. In hindsight, these descriptions seem to point to phenomena rarely observed anywhere in the real world, and this also testifies to the temporary nature of VHS as a moment in the early, naive phase of Polish capitalism, when the rules of the game – which are much more ruthless in the manner in which they allocate places in the division of labour – were yet to be settled. They condemn, for example, the petite bourgeoisie to a life befitting their class, one marked by the experience of potential marginalization and resentment.

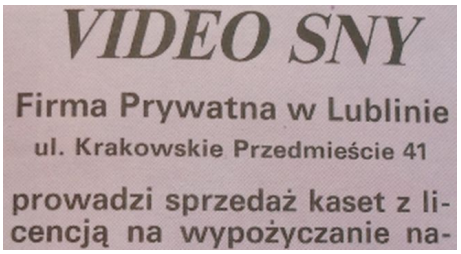
Capitalist realism is much more universal (and permanent), because it encompasses different versions of the market experience and the institutional configurations of capitalism, both the model of individual entrepreneurship and the model of alienated corporation – both in periods of growth and recession. Significantly, capitalist realism does not encourage any affective attitude towards capitalism: neither enthusiasm about the myriad of objects there to be admired (and visually consumed), nor begrudging acceptance of the brutal rules of the game. It disappoints neither the typical middle-class belief in one's own strength (undermined by the guilt stemming from one's "unfulfilled potential"), nor the cynical stance of the working class, which interprets the new system as a world of "dog eat dog" social relations. It is also in this sense that VHS was popular: it lacked a class marker, while its tawdry aesthetic would be off-putting only to the intelligentsia, a class defined by its ethos rather than market position.[40] The extraordinary capacity of capitalist realism was inscribed into the system of film genres itself: each type of story addressed a different kind of fantasy about the viewer's own place in the world of the market.

At the same time, VHS operated in a "mass-ive" way and ensured that, by standardization of content, the spectrum of all possible individual fantasies were pushed towards acceptance of

the capitalist world as the only systemic option, the only realistic context for one's own actions and experiences. It is for this reason, among others, that the opposition between the popular and mass culture referred to above remains unresolvable: VHS cannot permanently be located closer to either pole. The opposition thus acquires the status of a contradiction in the strong, structuralist sense of the word.

Market/Mirage

The ideological machine I have named "VHS" in this article operated at three levels simultaneously. At the content level, VHS was a medium for capitalist realism: the image of capitalism was far from unambiguous, but it was re-familiarized with each new story, gradually crossing over from the realm of the exotic into the realm of nostalgia. It also contained a hefty dose of emancipatory values associated with the American version of individualism and populism. This image allowed simultaneously for criticism of and love for America,[41] a combination which enabled it to shape the viewers' attitudes towards the new system that was being implemented in Poland at the time: a brutal and radically uncertain one that nevertheless promised to reward the proactive, strong individual. A model individual is a member of the petite bourgeoisie, someone who distrusts the world of collective labour and aspires to the distinctions associated with the world of the symbolic elite. In the form described in this article, capitalist realism itself is marked by the petit-bourgeois values of self-reliance and distrust towards the outside world. It fails to offer any perspective on the capitalist world, at the same time it is not an idealized vision of the market as a space for self-realization.



At the business strategy level, VHS implemented a much more "romantic" small business model, one that derived its energy from an individual's fascination with and passion for money. As a business, it was also paradigmatic of the early, yet unorganized phase of capitalism in Poland: the VHS market was receptive and the barriers to entry were still comparatively low, particularly for the myriad "retailers" such as stores and rental shops. The distribution business was more complicated, but even there individuals without much experience in television or film distribution could still succeed. Up to a point, of course: this transitional period came to an end in several branches of the industry and overlaps in time with the technological demise of VHS as a medium and a phenomenon.

Finally, at the audience level, VHS provided a comprehensive product: it offered a whole world of depictions, from sentimental family stories to alternative, more pessimistic or "subcultural" ones (as in the case of niche genres that were largely unknown in Poland prior to the VHS era). It was a ready utopia of low-price, instant gratification, and it provided the first model of consumer experience, in which the customer had to seek out something that would satisfy his desires. On the other hand, it offered an early taste of the fatigue associated with a monotonous selection that appeared rich, but was in fact little more than a series of repeated formulas (particularly in the case of B movies).

"VHS" was therefore a certain image of the market, a model of social relations, a product with which one could identify and a business. And, of course, it was ephemeral: in keeping with the capitalist logic of growth by destruction, it was literally wiped from the face of the earth, giving way to various forms o in the audiovisual industry and becoming another market experience. The whole realm of aesthetic and social experiences symbolized

by the acronym turned out to be a mirage: VHS disappeared within just a few years, leaving almost nothing behind.

[On 29 December 2020 the text was edited; changes were made to the terminology; they do not change the volume or content of the article, but were essential for its clarity and consistency.]

1 Not unlike the famous "steam engine" which Marx had once been so fascinated with.

2 Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York–London: Routledge, 2007), 214.

3 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London–New York, 1991).

4 I treat the concept of ideology as a theoretical concept, rather than a common term, and therefore strive to consistently avoid the use of terms associated with competing approaches to the subject. I have decided not to use such concepts as the "dispositif," which was developed within the Foucault tradition, and is thus at odds with ideological criticism. For a discussion of the opposition between discourse theory and ideological criticism, see, for example, Mark Poster, *Foucault, Marxism and History. Mode of Production versus Mode of Information* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 83–87; Siniša Malešević, "Rehabilitating Ideology after Poststructuralism," in *Ideology After Poststructuralism*, ed. Siniša Malešević, Iain MacKenzie (London: Pluto Press, 2012); and Krzysztof Świrek, "Trzy końce ideologii. Najważniejsze dwudziestowieczne ujęcia problemu," [The Three Ends of Ideology. The Main 20th Century Approaches to the Problem], "Nauka i Szkolnictwo Wyższe" [Higher Education and the Sciences], (1/41) 2013, 50–52.

5 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 2. Emphasis in the original.

6 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London-New York: Verso, 1998), 50.

7 See ibid., 70–71.

8 Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London–New York: Verso: 1999), 7.

9 See, for example, the famous passages in Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press).

10 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press), 182–183.

11 There were, of course, exceptions, among them the catalog published by SILESIA Film,

which included a selection of French and Polish films.

12 The genre was the most frequently used criterion in arranging titles on the shelves of video rental shops. Similar categories were used in the film review sections of the leading titles of the industry press, for example "Cinema Press Video," a monthly periodical which featured reviews of most of the titles distributed on VHS in Poland.

13 Except for the catalogues of companies such as Gutek Film, Solopan and Tantra.

14 See also Steven Best, "Robocop: The Crisis of Subjectivity," www.drstevebest.org/Robocop.htm, accessed May 31, 2016.

15 See the online archive at http://www.zofiarydet.com/pl/library?page=5&keywords=145, accessed March 25, 2016.

16 For more on these themes in film noir, see Marc Vernet, "Film Noir on the Edge of Doom," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London-New York: Verso, 1993), 17–20. For the history of American populism, see Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

17 Based on data provided by CBOS in the reports "Dobra trwałego użytku" [Durable Goods], 1992, "Dobra trwałego użytku w gospodarstwach domowych" [Durable Goods in Households], 1998, 1999, 2004, "Wyposażenie gospodarstw domowych w dobra trwałego użytku" [Durable Goods Found in Households], 2007, and "Wzrost standardu wyposażenia gospodarstw domowych" [Increase in the Standard of Household Equipment], 2011. www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/raporty.php, accessed January 24, 2016.

18 Including "pirate" companies. See Grzegorz Fortuna, Jr., "Biznes, piractwo i kasety wideo. Dystrybucja kaset VHS w okresie transformacji" [Business, Piracy and Videotapes. The Distribution of VHS Cassettes in the Transitional Period], in *Wokół zagadnień dystrybucji filmowej* [On Film Distribution], ed. Marcin Adamczak, Konrad Klejsa (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Biblioteki PWSFTviT, 2015), 73–75.

19 Rafał Balsam, "Pasja według Jakuba" [The Passion of Jacob], "Cinema Press Video," (37), 1993, 9.

20 Piotr Dzik, "Małe jest piękne. Rozmowa z Krzysztofem Rogozińskim i Arturem Kowalczykiem, właścicielami firmy EUROKADR" [Small is Beautiful. An Interview with EUROKADR Owners Krzysztof Rogoziński and Artur Kowalczyk], "Cinema Press Video" (28), 1992, 9.

21 Grzegorz Fortuna, Jr., estimates that at the height of VHS's popularity, there was one video rental store per 1,100–1,500 inhabitants. See also Fortuna, "Biznes, piractwo i kasety video...", op. cit., 68.

22 Piotr Zawadzki, "Złote czasy 'Lodów na patyku'" [The Golden Age of the *Lemon Popsicle*], "Magazyn Katowice" [Katowice Magazine], April 4, 2011, http://katowice.wyborcza.pl/katowice/1,35055,9372704,Zlote_czasy_Lodow_na_patyku.html accessed January 10, 2015.

23 Piotr Dzik, "Czy koniec polskiego video?" [Is This the End of Video in Poland?], "Cinema Press Video," nr. (28), 1992, 8.

24 Editor, "Na obraz i podobieństwo" [In His Own Image], "Cinema Press Video," (57), 1994, 3.

25 Anna Baranowska, "Gra o przyszłość" [The Future is at Stake], "Video Fan," (7–8), 1992. I found a scanned image of the article on the indispensable blog vhshell (vhshell.tumblr.com, accessed January 24, 2016), which collects images from the heyday of the VHS market: scanned posters, photos of video rental stores and reproductions of articles published in the industry press.

26 Both quotes: ibid., 46.

27 Ibid., 48.

28 Rafał Jaworski, "Robię tylko to, na co pozwala mi żona. Rozmowa z Krzysztofem Kłuskiem, dyrektorem filii Przedsiębiorstwa Zagranicznego ITI w Częstochowie" [I Only Do What My Wife Lets Me. An Interview with Krzysztof Kłusek, Regional Director of the Częstochowa Branch of the ITI International Company], "Cinema Press Video," (17–18), 1991: 9. Once hired, the subject was permitted to select his own coworkers. He boasts about choosing "highly attractive girls," which also appears to have been a typical practice at the time. See ibid.

29 See Elizabeth C. Dunn, *Privatizing Poland. Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor* (Ithaca–London: Cornell University Press, 2004).

30 A type of production colorfully described as a "low-budget piece of shit that was going straight to video" by one film industry insider featured in the Abel Ferrara documentary *Not Guilty* (2003).

31 Many B movies can be described as "classics" (in the sense that they are well known, have remained popular for many years and have come to define a certain category of films, like the work of Roger Corman), while the term "masterpiece" is associated more with auteur films, particularly among critics.

32 See Anna Baranowska, "Gra o przyszłość," 45–48, and Ewa Grunert, "Błędy w strategii" [Strategic Errors], "Cinema Press Video," (21), 1991.

33 "Cinema Press Video" was sold to a German investor in 1999, after which it was no longer published.

34 For more on instantaneity in late capitalism, see Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London–New York: Verso, 2013).

35 See, for example, the opinions expressed by Jean-Luc Godard in the Wim Wenders film *Room 666* (1982).

36 For more on this opposition, see the classic article by Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," in Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*….

37 "Cinema Press Video," 7, 8, 10/1990; 11, 13, 15, 17–18, 22/1992; 1, 2/1992.

38 Andrzej Werner describes "new adventure films" (particular those by Spielberg and Lucas) as a sort of "counter-reformation," and views them as examples of the "abandonment of the Promethean hopes" of the 1960s, with the criticism of capitalism and the social order that were typical in that revolutionary decade. See Andrzej Werner, "Przemiany mediów i zagrożenie kultury" [The Transformation of Media and the Threat of Culture], in *Nowe media w komunikacji społecznej XX wieku* [New Media in 20th-Century Social Communication], ed. Maryla Hopfinger (Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 2005), 655. Jerzy Szyłak refers to the early new adventure films (with no critical intent) as "escapist." See Jerzy Szyłak, "Kino Nowej Przygody – jego cechy i granice" [The Features and Limits of New Adventure Films], in Szyłak, et al., *Kino Nowej Przygody* [New Adventure Films] (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2011), 11.

39 These years also saw the collapse of so-called mini majors: relatively small, independent studios such as New Line and Orion that nevertheless produced important films in that era. For more on this topic, see Marcin Adamczak, *Globalne Hollywood, filmowa Europa i polskie kino po 1989 roku* [Global Hollywood, Cinematic Europe and

Polish Cinema After 1989] (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2010), 144–145.

40 Andrzej Werner calls direct-to-video films "mass-produced hack jobs." See Andrzej Werner, *Przemiany mediów...*, 658. He describes the period as a "cable and cassette revolution" whose effects were "catastrophic," as they targeted a society that lacked any "defense mechanisms" that would protect them from the "advertising myths of mass culture." All quotes taken from pages 663–664.

41 This observation was inspired by a sentence from Marc Vernet, who described film noir as allowing one "to hate the United States but love its cinema" (which is why left-wing intellectuals adore it). See Marc Vernet, "Film Noir on the Edge of Doom," 6.