22

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abstract:

The author analyses Grzegorz Królikiewicz's Trees (1994) in two ways: as a metaphor of the Polish post-1989 transition, and as an eco-horror presenting the complexity of relations between human and plant world. This binary interpretation attempts to answer the question about the causes of the failure of Trees as a film project. The film itself may also be interpreted as a story about historical conditions that affect the ability to create visual representations of the social costs of political changes, as well as ecocritical issues.

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The Avant-Garde of Sensitivity: On Grzegorz Królikiewicz's "The Trees"

The easiest way to begin a text about Grzegorz Królikiewicz is to recognize a fundamental lack: the filmmaker's absence in the mainstream history of Polish cinema and the awareness of broader audiences. His films may have been frequently covered by press titles dealing with film criticism, yet never effectively enough to firmly situate him in the canon. That is why texts devoted to Królikiewicz are constantly penned under the banner of "reclaiming the memory" of a forgotten or rejected artist.[1] Such framing makes it possible to move freely between the nodal problems that accompany the reception of his films: the poorly known theory of off-screen space that he formulated, the inaccessibility of the films founded on that theory, and finally – the controversial views of the director, who tended to express himself in a radical way, unacceptable to some viewers.[2]

However, writing about Królikiewicz's oeuvre from the perspective of a lack determines not only the starting point, but also the effect that one wishes to achieve. Hence, the tacit but clearly sensed task of the critic or film studies expert is to restore the memory of a work relegated to the margins of the history of Polish cinema. Such an approach informs selections made from the director's output, of which only the most important and unquestionably successful works have been deservedly introduced into mainstream discourse: *Through and Through* (1972), which screened during the prestigious Critics' Week at the Cannes Film Festival, *The Dancing Hawk* (1977), and *The Case of Pekosiński* (1993), to name just a few of those most often mentioned. Thus, Królikiewicz's oeuvre is necessarily subject to a reconfiguration, by which the films that resonate poorly with the expectations of scholars, critics, or viewers are relegated to the margins. That is why *The Trees* (1996) can easily

(or deliberately) be overlooked.

Let us state this openly: the film failed in artistic terms, and was almost entirely passed over in silence at the time of its premiere.[3] If mentioned at all, it appears in the context of lists of the worst Polish films.[4] The filmmaker himself admitted, albeit reluctantly, that *The Trees* is a failed motion picture. In response to Piotr Kletowski's question concerning the film's enigmatic nature and the difficulty of interpreting it (due to its deliberate artistic strategy), Królikiewicz stated:

> I took the risk and, apparently, it didn't work. All my visions of the proximity of plants may not have been translated so seamlessly into a depiction of evil that struck people. The plants themselves are obviously a metaphor in the film – they represent weaker individuals, those stripped of a range of possibilities, such as walking, changing their location, defense. Trees are strong, sturdy, heavy, but also defenseless. We also mustn't forget that those trees, those helpless people, may take revenge for their own helplessness.[5]

The film's failure becomes even more acute once we consider its underlying artistic principles. It took considerable courage to choose the horror genre – never popular or particularly valued in Polish cinema. Whenever scarce examples, such as Marek Piestrak's *She-Wolf* (1983) and *Curse of Snakes Valley* (1988), and later, the lesser-known *Arche: Pure Evil* (2002) by Grzegorz Auguścik, were written into the history of Polish cinema, they were included as cinematic curiosities. Despite the inglorious tradition and a modest budget, Królikiewicz chose to shoot an eco-horror movie where the threat is posed by trees, which can feel and are aware of their perennially suffered harm. The plant metaphor was devised as the core of the film's plot, which connected several significatory dimensions of *The Trees*. Yet the literally understood dimension of empathy for plants fails to connect seamlessly with both the clearly indicated order of a Biblical tale of evil inherent in human nature, and with the references to the reality following the 1989 political

breakthrough in Poland.

Why then should we write about a failed motion picture, dug out of a filmography that already requires so much effort to be reclaimed for a broader audience? The answer is based on a set of dispersed intuitions. The first is implied by the filmmaker's statement accompanying the book-length interview with him, *Pracuję dla przyszłości* [*Working for the Future*].[6] His words aptly signalize the dissonance, fundamental to his work, between the present and the past – the deliberate contestation of the now and the validity of its worldview narratives indicates the basic characteristic of Królikiewicz's avant-garde approach to film. From the recesses thus carved in ideological monoliths, the director brought into the open those who history forgot or refused to remember: Bronisław Pekosiński, stripped of identity and memory, and the protagonists of *Neighbors* (2014), to name just the most obvious examples.

In the context of *The Trees*, time has a special (and this time negative) meaning. Rather than opening up the possibility of a dispute, emblematic of Królikiewicz's method, with the ideological norms of the era, it leads rather to a painful failure to meet such norms. This trope is highlighted by the filmmaker, who repeats a number of times in the conversation with Piotr Kletowski and Piotr Marecki that *The Trees* was shot *too soon*: "too soon in Poland, and perhaps too soon in its own right."[7] But what does that ill-timing say about relations between humans and plants?

Królikiewicz's statement could potentially be understood with regard to ecological awareness, which was only slowly elbowing its way to broader social awareness then. Yet the most probable reference seems to concern the political and social context. This is the paradox, now obvious, of the initial years of the Polish post-1989 transition: when the threat of censorship disappeared and it seemed that everything could be said, Polish cinema – much to its own surprise – collided with the "invisible hand of the market," which sets limited conditions for any kind of

statement. Yet if the focus on profit and rhapsodizing over the Western European model of modernity are the fundamental and most general reasons for the lack of success of Polish cinema of the 1990s,[8] the case of *The Trees* provokes more nuanced questions about the conditions and borders of the cinematic portrayal of the early years of the country's transition to democracy.

If *The Trees* deserves being written about, it is not in order to introduce the work into film-critical circulation as an important – albeit forgotten – piece created by a great master. The idiomaticity of the artist's imagination is asserted not only through renowned and recognized avant-garde masterpieces, but also by his failures, which can sometimes be no less spectacular than the successes. Bringing one such failure back to memory allows us to remember Królikiewicz's oeuvre in a way that differs slightly from the hitherto applied approach to writing about the filmmaker – it becomes an index of his twisted and restless pursuit in the realm of art and worldview, which is intriguing even if it leads to cinematic disaster.

The 'dreamt-through' transition

In the article *Michał Toporny, czyli Foster Kane na miarę naszych możliwości* [*Michał Toporny, or Foster Kane to the Best of Our Potential*], Jakub Majmurek drew attention to the extraordinary characteristics of Grzegorz Królikiewicz's auteur film poetics, which the filmmaker taps into in order to successfully portray a different dimension of Polish history on the screen, corresponding to a greater extent to the structure of a dream. Seen from this perspective, *The Dancing Hawk* (1977) emerges as a unique testimony to the "dreamt-through revolution" of 1944–1956, as discussed by Andrzej Leder:

> It was conducted by Others, leaving no room for the most subjectivated segments of the nation to identify with decisions, actions, and the responsibility for what

> happened. As a result, the revolution was experienced by Polish society as if it was a nightmare; a dream in which the innermost and most gruesome desires and fears came true. Yet it was a dream in which the fulfilment of desires and fears was experienced in a passive way, without participation as a subject, as if everything was happening of its own accord.[9]

The former social configuration, in which symbolic capital remained primarily at the disposal of the landed gentry and military-official elites, was annihilated. During the process of the violence-fueled formation of the new Polish People's Republic, extending many years after the great purge of World War II, social structures established by foreign actors recruited the representatives of the people's class – the passive beneficiaries of the new order and, at the same time, the victims of Stalinist terror. Briefly summarized here, the plexus of factors – war activities, the exchange of elites, the liberation of the people's class alongside the deposits of hatred accumulated throughout the centuries, and the development of a new national imaginary by the hands of Others – form, according to Majmurek, a surreal surplus of history, in the face of which "every true realism must inevitably become a dark, cruel surrealism."[10] The revolutionary spirit of 1944–1956 is almost entirely lost in stories that aim to closely approach the directness of historical concreteness.

The "dreamt-through" history of Poland after World War II calls for a different manner of formulating statements, in order to convey the phantasmal structure of the transformational realm – a possibility that Królikiewicz's auteur poetics affords. According to his theory, space in film is divided into two separate levels: the inside of the frame (the reality of film) and the outside of the frame – the off-screen space (the dream of film). The use of the latter (invisible) sphere in order to generate meaning during projection compels the viewer to actively participate in the co-creation of the film and, more than that, to actively work through both the content of the film and their own experience. Therefore, the poetics of the space beyond the frame

establishes different, more democratic,[11] relations between the viewer and the moving image, while at the same time affording an insight into historical time – impossible to depict in a way other than beyond the realistic order of representation – through the oneiric, phantasmal surpluses of the story.

This aspect of the way images work in Królikiewicz's films was also highlighted by Kuba Mikurda in his analysis of *The Case of Pekosiński*, in the context of Polish cinema after the breakthrough of 1989. Yet Mikurda embraced the director's auteur theory of film primarily as a project of developing in the viewer the individual ability to introduce a certain order into the cognitive chaos of the "proto-history" of the initial years of the political transformation – a history that was still traumatic since it was too recent, and therefore unconsolidated and only at the stage of searching for its stable narrative. Królikiewicz's efforts, however, would not lead to establishing an unambiguous and general understanding of history; rather, the aim would consist of championing individual ongoing work towards stabilizing oneself in the face of the overwhelming and disorientating experience of historicity.[12]

A question worthy of reflection is whether it is really the insufficient temporal distance which poses the greatest obstacle to formulating a narrative concerning the early 1990s, and if *The Case of Pekosiński* indeed provides the best account of the difficulties involved. I believe that Majmurek's text is much more apt than Mikurda's in indicating a particular characteristic of the poetics of Królikiewicz's films, which resonates in the tenderest of ways with the phantasmal character of an era shaken by post-transition shockwaves. However, insofar as in *The Dancing Hawk* we co-dream the anomie of the period between 1944 and 1956, the subject matter of *The Trees* is already a completely different timelessness – the Polish transition period. As we may understand from the book-length interview with Królikiewicz, the film was an attempt to arrange in a certain order the trauma of rapid transformation of the political regime and, as Kletowski

argues, "a metaphor for Poland after 1989."[13] Moreover, the filmmaker's ambition went beyond training the viewer to cope with the cognitive challenges of making sense of the chaos of history – the point was also to bring to light the stories, passed over in silence, of the social cost of the economic and political reforms, to "represent weaker individuals, those stripped of a range of possibilities."

The strange historical moment that stretches between somewhere around 1986 and 1994,[14] assembled from the collisions and flows of two different political orders, was discussed, among other authors, by Olga Drenda in *Duchologia polska* [Polish Hauntology]. Drenda demonstrates the phantom-like character of the early years of the Polish transition with the example of an ordinary postcard from the GDR, which unleashes a "machinery of spirits":

> It is a postcard from a utopia nearing an end, preserved in the characteristic, saturated ORWOCOLOR color scheme. While writing about this phenomenon at some point in the past, I began to think about what it would look like in the Polish realm. Scraps of memories, distortions of memory fell like a cloud of dust from an old curtain [...] it turned out that the combination of peculiarity, absurdity, nostalgia, and anxiety is familiar to many people who experienced the moment of a little end of a certain world – entropy in the ruins of utopia – or those at least able to imagine that.[15]

These few sentences convey the entire ambiguity of the experience of political transition, which – I believe – acquires the characteristics of a disturbing dream, especially in visual terms. That is why reconstructions of the anatomy of the Polish post-1989 transition are usually accompanied by a sense of a surreal, phantom-like destabilization of history. In the void that emerged after the communist system, in which the potential of social advancement was often coupled with an escalation of violence, everything could happen. At the same time, the socio-political

changes that occurred at the time were tightly wrapped in the dream of progress and of "catching up" with Europe. As described by Drenda, the hauntological, almost oneiric character of the initial years of the transformation therefore indicates the plexus, regardless of the temporal distance, of the difficulties in formulating a narrative concerning the experience of the historical breakthrough in 1989, which Królikiewicz attempts to confront in *The Trees* by means of a vegetation metaphor.

The laboratory of history

Unpacking the core metaphor in the film should begin with the main character – the pregnant scientist Ewa (Ewa Kasprzyk), who conducts research on plants in a modern Eden.[16] Underneath a glass roof, she examines living organisms degraded to the function of a de-subjectivated object of experiment. The laboratory therefore becomes a place where rationalistic premises motivate an endurance test performed on those deprived of the right to speak.

In the article *Ekologie roślin i wiedzy* [*Ecologies of Plants and Knowledge*], Małgorzata Sugiera discusses the problem of complex relations between the world of plants and the subsequent stages of development of experimental sciences and colonial practices. Following Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, she writes about the regime of scale in scientific research – the cumulation of universal knowledge at the expense of local biological diversity. It was on the grounds of modern botany, which emerged alongside the imperial expansion of the production of goods such as sugar cane and coffee, that a model taxonomic system for all sciences developed, oriented primarily towards self-confirmation. "As a consequence, it was the system as such – and not its components: specific plants – that provided the basic source of knowledge, and it embraced new specimens only insofar as they confirmed its fundamental principles."[17] In the article *On Nonscalability*, referred to by Sugiera, Lowenhaupt Tsing goes a bit further. Scalability originates from a business

model that determines an expansion practice that remains unaltered and independent of varied natural, social, and economic conditions. The far-reaching reorganization of local landscape for the needs of sugar cane cultivation was aimed at creating something of a *terra nullius*, a land purged of biological and cultural diversity, liberated from "the enemies of progress."[18] That model did not disappear once European colonial conquest came to an end; according to Tsing, scalability continues to provide an ideological basis for progressive development scenarios not only in business, but also in technology and politics.

These diagnoses illuminate *The Trees* from two closely linked perspectives simultaneously: eco-critical reflection on the mechanism of the reduction of the plants under examination to the role of material for experiment (and, more broadly, reflection on human relations with nature), and criticism of the modernization shockwaves of the early 1990s. A reason to accept the former point of view can be found in a statement made by the filmmaker himself, who spoke about his personal attitude to plants, which provided the initial stimulus to make the film:

> In my childhood I was surrounded by a wonderful world of plants – as in Faulkner. I spent entire days listening to the trees, staring at Tamarix. That was how a certain intimacy developed between myself and plants.
> Before I even started making films I thought: that intimacy needs examining. And I began from the scholarly side of things. [...] I started reading, and a whole sphere of unbelievable human cruelty opened up before me, and I realized that plants had a reason to take revenge on us. We have lost our sensitivity: abortion is not called killing the fetus, but termination of pregnancy, and that is what we do to plants. [...] I was also very much struck by the cruelty of scientists – these are the origins of the female character played by Ewa Kasprzyk.[19]

Ewa's scientific project is one of the main themes of *The Trees*,

which conveys in the most expressive way the human attitude towards nature. Almost at the very beginning of the film, viewers witness a landmark discovery made by the protagonist, who manages to record a plant's reaction to pain. She tortures leaves and rootstocks wired to her laboratory machinery, observing with fascination the fluctuating amplitude of waves flowing across the screen – a record of inflicted suffering. The rapid kinks of the curve displayed on the black monitor bear testimony to the success of her research. The mute variables of the record on the screen will recur – akin to a chorus – in the film, as a visual testimony of the harm inflicted on plants.

The discovery of the emotional dimension of plant life through recording their pain invites questions as to the ethical dimension of similar scientific experiments. In a telephone conversation, Ewa confesses to the Professor (Leon Niemczyk), with whom she has previously worked: "I fear now that it is going beyond the scientific code. I'm not sure if science is morally indifferent." That barely signalized uncertainty as to the moral borders of knowledge production will later become the essential topic discussed by the Professor and Ewa by the sea. In that scene, crucial to *The Trees* and based on the temptation of the first woman in the Old Testament, the Professor seeks to convince the researcher to publish the results of her discovery together with him. Yet the conclusions of the final version of the text, redacted by him, differ completely from the real results – they have been altered, "against plants, against life," as Ewa states, and she poses a question about conscience – a fuse that protects science from going astray in ethical terms. The Professor tries to tempt Ewa, not so much with the prospect of scientific fame ("you'll get the Nobel Prize!"), but rather with that of the knowledge that offers control over existence. He states that "this fear [of death – S. B-K.] can only be overcome when one gains power – power over someone else's death. Observing someone's death means overcoming one's own fear." The Professor considers knowledge merely as a tool of expansion

– a necessary and flexible means of managing reality. In order to achieve the intended goal, he freely manipulates Ewa's discovery, untroubled by conscience. Data harvested in the field of experimental science will be adjusted to a vision of the world in which trees, if not considered downright hostile, need at least to be made redundant. Yet the success of his vision is not measured according to material profit, but by the very agency involved in freely establishing the scale beyond which weaker, mute plants will be consistently relegated.

The Professor character in *The Trees* appears as the most radical representation of the figure of human cruelty to nature, rendered even more acute by existential nihilism and the insatiable pursuit of power. Yet, according to Królikiewicz, such a universal flaw is inherent in every human being. The filmmaker turned the unpunished, brutal treatment of plants, which he eagerly portrays on the screen, into one of the principal impulses that propel the horror genre mechanisms in his film. One of the initial scenes features Paweł (Paweł Wawrzecki) wandering through the forest. He is a biology teacher, the partner of the main character and, it seems, a custodian of sorts of the nearby woods, who accidentally witnesses illegal logging. His attempt to intervene results in a violent flash of the culprit's temper and a barrage of abuse: "What are you writing this ticket on? On paper, you dumbass, right? Someone had to fell a tree to make paper so that you can scribble this ticket, you slimeball." This is one of many moments in *The Trees* that offer a broader depiction of the relations between humans and plants. It is founded on the total domination of humans, sanctioned by centuries of practice, who transform nature for their own needs. They have no intention of resigning that power, and any attempt at undermining their position sparks aggression. Thus, forests are considered exclusively as a resource of useful, freely exploited raw material, not as biodiverse spaces for plant life. Therefore, the difference between the Professor and other characters of *The Trees*

only boils down to the scale and reach of their activity.

Given such an asymmetrical relation of power between human beings and the natural world, Królikiewicz consistently situates his camera on the latter, de-subjectivated, side of the conflict. In *The Trees*, that side gazes both from a bird's-eye perspective and from ground level. The filmmaker's signature surreal film poetics generates a space here in which the viewer who co-dreams the images is forced to adopt the perspective of the plants – to empathize with their harm and share their wrath. He or she is also supposed to follow them in awakening to take revenge, as a result of which the trees – pushed over the edge and thus compelled to seek bloody justice, yet weak enough to be unable to defend themselves against retaliation – literally fall on people's heads.

The attempt at turning the tables finally brings about a tragedy – a child dies – which unleashes a chain of violence against plants, a lynching perpetrated by local residents. The last person to remain unconvinced as to the necessity of the mass logging of these "criminals" is Paweł. He repeats until the very last moment that "we mustn't take revenge – it's beneath humans." Yet in the very next scene this forest defender, who educates children about the necessity of harmonious co-existence with plants, heads a group armed with chainsaws, shouting: "We won! People can never be defeated!" The moment that he abandons his worldview – resigns from faith in the possibility of establishing more equal relations between humans and nature – is significant, as it connects with other tropes (discussed further) that afford a more socio-historical interpretation of *The Trees*. That scene was probably referred to, at least in part, by Piotr Kletowski, when he hailed Paweł (and, elsewhere, the entire film) as the figure of Poland after 1989:

> Like all of us born in Poland under communism, and therefore infected with evil, he is unable to build something new [...] Perhaps this requires a generation that will indeed be aware

> of the past, but will not carry its personal burden. Akin to the old generation of Jews who journeyed to the Promised Land, but could not enter it as it bore traces of Egyptian slavery – only the new generation could make it happen.[20]

Ewa's partner in the film (an "intelligentsia scoundrel" – an insult he hears hurled at him by a man illegally felling trees in the forest) represents a generation shaped and given their experience by the communist political order, which entered the Polish reality after the breakthrough, hoping for a new, fairer social order. It actively participated in the shaping of that order by controlling, educating, and implementing the ideal of co-existence between classes. Yet it seems that the question of the legacy of the Polish People's Republic, which continued to burden the political consciousness of the builders of the Polish transition, is problematized in *The Trees* in a much more nuanced way. Likewise, conclusions thereof would not necessarily be identical to Kletowski's diagnosis, and lead to stating the necessity of a generational exchange of the Polish intelligentsia.

"Us" and "Them"

The first question posed by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in her previously mentioned text is: "Why have people called expansion 'growth' as if it were a biological process?"[21] This conveys the most significant point made by the scholar, who conducts research on the relations between colonial plantation practices and the capitalist order, tracing the ways in which the practices of conquest undergo naturalization – not only from a historical perspective, but also from a contemporary one.

A similar intuition appears to inform *The Trees*, in which scientific research on biological matter comes to represent the political transformation that scales the living tissue of society according to the final goal of "accessing" Europe. In other words, the core concept of the film consists of equating Ewa's scientific experiment with the experiment on political regime conducted in

Poland after 1989. Constantly recurring in the film, the black monitor that records the effects of the experiment affords an insight into the psyche of plants, which – as one might suspect – stand as a symbol of Polish society. It also offers the possibility to look more closely at everything that failed to fit within the norms of visibility[22] of the early years of the Polish transition – the people who proved too weak to tap into the chances generated by the surplus of history, and thus fell outside the order of representation oriented towards the discourse of "catching up with the West." Reducing harm to mere data – the individual distortions, abstracted from concrete reality, of the straight neon line that runs across the screen – makes it possible to transform individual biographies into statistics, and thereby freely inscribe them into the profit and loss calculation of economic shock therapy. Thus, Królikiewicz manages to lend visibility to something that was supposed to be repressed from the field of vision and, at the same time, to foreground the horror of the mechanism that transforms individuals into simple diagrams. The recorded scream will ultimately remain mute, and merely bears testimony to the helplessness of victims facing the power of scientific-political scaling. The lost hope of those who came to be material for experimentation aggravates the perversity with which the research was calibrated. There are two scenes in the film that appear particularly significant in this context. In the first, the camera is positioned so as to cover Ewa's lips – tenderly whispering "Please, trust me" – with a little mirror that reflects the black monitor recording the reactions of plants to yet another torture session. In turn, in the second scene, Ewa's young son notices that a seedling he is observing trembles with fear, which – he suggests – is caused by his mother. Ewa offers a slightly patronizing response: "Don't be silly, I do it for their own good." Her declaration is not false if we take into account that it is primarily the uncertainty as to the ethical dimension of her research that will ultimately compel Ewa to reject the Professor's proposal to jointly publish the research

results. Her actions indeed seem informed by care for the plants' "good" (although this is merely potential), achieved in the course of a painful, but also necessary, process of knowledge acquisition. That knowledge, in turn, would lead to their (at least partial) emancipation from people. On the other hand, as passive research material, the plants are left with no choice – they are the ones to incur the costs of a merely transient process, whose justification and intention is determined by the scientist. For their own good, they therefore need to "trust" – to believe that their sacrifice for the sake of a higher goal makes sense. Both the mute plants in *The Trees* and the human being behind Królikiewicz's metaphor become hostages of progress.

The same logic of the normalization of loss incurred as a result of the Polish political and economic transition was highlighted by Magda Szcześniak, in her description of the mechanism behind the fundamental formula of the modernization discourse of the 1990s, which exorcizes any doubts whatsoever about the universally accepted, dominant political narrative focused on a hasty transplantation of the free-market model of Western democracy into Poland:

> Voices of criticism against the conducted market reforms were [...] systematically muted by those in favor of shock therapy, awaiting the economic growth anticipated by liberal economists. The dominant vision proved surprisingly narrow; it relied on faith in the equating power of market mechanisms and a gradual neutralization of social problems by the market itself.[23]

The "backwater" and the *homo sovieticus* are the main pillars of the (publicistic, scholarly, and visual) narrative, patronizing towards opponents, assembled from slogans about "growing up to democracy," "learning democracy," and "the ABC of free-market economy."[24] These slogans formed the tightly woven fabric of the collective dream of the Polish transition, which set the horizon of the social imagination.

Aware of the oppositions that accompanied the

transformation, Królikiewicz in *The Trees* makes a distinction (in a no-less manifest way) between "us" – weak plants/people stripped of political agency – and "them," who actively participate in one way or another in building the new political configuration. Akin to Ewa, Paweł also acts for the sake of a "higher good," although his function is rather that of an executor, not a policy-maker for the ideology of progress, which becomes one of the main reasons for the fights between him and his partner. It is not his own ambitions, but the suspected double nature of the activity (and relationship) of Ewa and the Professor that fuels Paweł's frustration. He vaguely realizes that the idea of the higher good is co-opted and distorted at the laboratory by forces pursuing their own interests – contradictory to the very idea. He also partly foresees the consequences of the experimental exploitation of the excluded, which may lead to an escalation of violence. As a representative of the generation of the builders of Poland, Paweł goes against his ideals not because (as Kletowski believes) he is burdened with the difficult legacy of the communist past; the reason behind his ultimate capitulation seems to be the discreditation of modernization practices, whose result does not consist of growing into democracy, but of stoking social conflict. Królikiewicz uses his characters as a means to clearly suggest that the role of the Polish intellectual elite in the process of political transformation was that of a "useful idiot" – the executor of a foreign plan ("a servant who issues tickets," as Paweł calls himself), who semi-consciously pushed society towards catastrophe, lured by the promise of a better future. Yet each character discovers their negative role too late: for Ewa, it occurs only when she has understood the real goal served by her (manipulated) research; for Paweł – when the revenge of plants and the escalation of violence on both sides have ultimately shattered the hope for establishing a lasting community.

Królikiewicz's suggestion becomes even clearer upon closer examination of the Professor's role in the Polish transformation process after 1989 as metaphorically outlined in *The Trees*. As an

expert in a publicistic television broadcast watched by Paweł, he talks about plants as a superfluous or even dangerous object of human sentiment. He drastically misrepresents the results of Ewa's research concerning the existence of the emotional life of plants, weaving them into a post-apocalyptic scenario with fantastical consequences for climate change. In his vision, an increase in the planet's temperature (by 20 degrees!) would usher in a complete reversal of the activity of the ecosystem and activate the expansive nature of the plant psyche. The Professor concludes with the powerful statement that plants are a "parasite that found a comfortable position between us and minerals. Most of them would die if we stopped delivering carbon dioxide, necessary for photosynthesis" – and if we secured them appropriate conditions for growth, they would turn against humans.

The scene is informed by the logic of exclusion by means of shame, known only too well from the publicism of the 1990s: affective exorcisms performed on the "the enemies of progress" as – on the one hand – a barely smoldering yet constantly present threat to the Enlightenment modernization project, while on the other hand – as the beneficiary of middle-class-generated profit, manifesting a scrounging attitude. At the same time, as Majmurek points out, that "parasite" was an indispensable element of the political scene:

> Through the pedagogy of shame, the backwater in the 1990s was not even portrayed as an object of transformation and modernization (let alone a subject), but as a radical external bottom from which Poland was supposed to bounce back – a living fossil that should bring shame and be left behind as soon as possible on the path towards modernization. And, following the principle of "inclusionary exclusion," that external layer was constantly present as part of the political and social reality after 1989.[25]

In *The Trees*, the scientist comes to represent, in the most

complete way, the political practices of the 1990s elites, actively participating in sustaining clear-cut boundaries between "us" and "them." In Królikiewicz's film, this diagnosis sounds all the more dire because it is the Professor, and not Paweł, who carries the heaviest burden of communist evil. The filmmaker did not mince his words when talking about this matter:

> I was also struck by the careers of the communist security office employees, who began to feel wonderfully at home at academies, in ecological organizations, in the Greens – terrific criminals who pretend to rescue the world of plants only in order to torment them again and fuel their careers with experiments on them, just as the Nazis experimented on women at Auschwitz. Cruelty.[26]

The Trees sends several powerful signals that indicate the Professor's double status in the process of implementing the new political system and setting the tone of public discourse. For instance, the character is called "an ace of seven secret services" by Paweł. Elsewhere, he addresses Ewa: "Don't believe what others say about my past." These little hints in the context of a story of the Polish political transformation of the 1990s suggest that the transition, pursued from the top down and at the expense of weaker individuals, was navigated from behind the scenes – if not by foreign political forces, then by corrupt individuals from the upper echelons of the hierarchy of influence. In other words, Królikiewicz made a film about both the social costs of the experiment with economic-political reform and about the "over-dreamed" mechanism of its implementation. In *The Trees*, economic shock therapy is an extension of the already invisible (but still influential) communist regime, whose endurance is guaranteed both by its agents and by the political elites they exploit.

Towards avant-garde sensitivity

Such a radical socio-political critique – quite extraordinary

against the backdrop of Polish cinema of the 1990s, and pursued from the very heart of political experimentation – once again compels the question about the conditions of its representation (including those beyond film). It might seem that Królikiewicz's cinematic poetics would also cope this time with the subject matter of the phantasmal "over-dreamed" period of the initial years after 1989, which could be penetrated so efficiently by means of a mechanism of micro-awakenings – dissonances, jams, and little flashes at the intersection of the dream of the West and the shortcomings of a reality consistently repressed beyond social consciousness. The theory of off-screen space is based on the premise that the viewer actively participates in co-creating the film, stating through their own visions and emotions what remains seemingly understated. The rules of such collaboration must rely on a certain community (at least partial, when established for the duration of the film) of sensitivity that offers conditions for identification with the film's subject-matter. Yet could such an agreement be reached in the sphere of two marginal narratives – eco-critical and anti-transformation?

From 1995's perspective, when *The Trees* was filmed, it is difficult to imagine a comparable critique of the Polish transformation period voiced so directly in Polish cinema[27] without resorting to thickly veiled metaphor. This is not only because Królikiewicz's diagnosis (concerning the illusory exchange of elites after 1989 and the continuation of pacts from the communist era) dovetails with the critique of the Third Polish Republic offered by right-wing milieus. Even the most valuable elements of that critique, which today form the basic repertoire of those who criticize the politics of the 1990s, could not fully resonate in 1995, given the character of the period – the universally valid dream of "catching up with Europe" on the one hand, and on the other hand, the pressure of modernization that disciplined public discourse and effectively exorcized any critique of political change.

Therefore, if the potential of direct self-expression was limited,

the decision to adopt an even less obvious, non-anthropocentric, perspective for the story comes across as ambitious but nevertheless surprising. According to Królikiewicz's intentions, reorienting the camera towards a non-human point of view was supposed to open the viewer to "avant-garde sensitivity"[28] – an alternative perspective on reality, still difficult to devise (differently) and verbalize. This is, however, where we encounter a plexus of difficulties: the border that separates human beings from plants, as well as the deficiencies of the vocabulary that could be used in attempts to render that border more fluid. It might seem that adopting the point of view of trees would allow the filmmaker to confront at least the first of these problems; yet at the first, eco-critical level of the film's metaphor, the viewer is set in the positions of the punisher and the punished, which is difficult to accept. In the nightmare devised by Królikiewicz, blurring the borders of the biosphere leads to a cognitive dissonance that obstructs the work of the film-dream. The viewer is compelled to recognize themselves as a perennial human-executioner who exploits natural resources and, at the same time, as a victim from whose perspective we observe the world, and with whom we sense the historical harm inflicted by ourselves. The choice of a non-anthropocentric, non-realistic, formula for the critique of transformation only hampered the possibility of empathetic entry into the structure of the film – which was oriented, after all, towards viewers' co-participation.

Therefore, there are at least two factors that contributed to the failure of *The Trees*. The most obvious stems from the inner weakness of the film, in which "All [...] visions of the proximity of plants may not have been translated so seamlessly into a depiction of evil that struck people."[29] The second factor, far more thought-provoking and worthy of attention, relates to external limitations, which squeezed the filmmaker's statement in advance into the norms of visibility. In other words, Królikiewicz's film offers a prism through which to look at the first half of the 1990s – not only as a series of rapid economic transformations

for the film industry, but also as something of a dictionary that determines the tight borders of the depiction of the new reality.

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