

# **Stony Brook University**



OFFICIAL COPY

**The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.**

**© All Rights Reserved by Author.**

**Peripheral Visions: Regional Identity in the Literature and Cinema of  
East Central Europe**

A Dissertation Presented

by

**Agnieszka Skrodzka-Bates**

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

**Comparative Literature**

Stony Brook University

**May 2007**

**Stony Brook University**

The Graduate School

**Agnieszka Skrodzka-Bates**

We, the dissertation committee for the above candidate for the  
Doctor of Philosophy degree, hereby recommend  
acceptance of this dissertation.

**Sandy Petrey – Dissertation Director**

Professor, Comparative Literature and European Languages

**Robert Harvey – Chairperson of Defense**

Professor, Comparative Literature and European Languages

**Lou Charnon-Deutsch**

Professor, Hispanic Languages and Literature and Comparative Literature

**Daniela Flesler – Outside Reader**

Assistant Professor, Hispanic Languages and Literature

This dissertation is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin  
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Dissertation

**Peripheral Visions: Regional Identity in the Literature and Cinema of  
East Central Europe**

by

**Agnieszka Skrodzka-Bates**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

in

**Comparative Literature**

Stony Brook University

**2007**

This dissertation examines the ways in which artists from East Central Europe simultaneously explore the peripheral European consciousness and challenge the dismissive discourse of Eurocentrism. I chose to interrogate that discourse from a unique regional perspective in order to open the discussion of the imaginary Europe to cultural influences that rose inside but apart from the tradition steeped in ancient Greece, Christianity, and the European colonization of the New World. In a sense, the very discourse of Eurocentrism contributes to the negative and exclusionary politics that it originally set out to criticize. In the hands on some post-colonial scholars, Eurocentrism functions as a way to congeal the dimensions of the “enemy” and crystallize the binary of the European colonizing center and the colonized margins. This clarifying

conceptualizing strategy comes at a great price: Europe is reduced to a few politically and economically powerful nations. The intricacy of this continent's multilingual, multid denominational, and multicultural identity is greatly limited. In this dissertation, by focusing on the European colonization of Europe (its own marginal territories), I signal the complex hierarchies that exist within the center of Eurocentrism, and reflect on the shifts in Europe's awareness of its own identity. I read selected texts by Bruno Schulz, Eva Hoffman, Milan Kundera, and films by Agnieszka Holland, Jan Jakub Kolski and Krzysztof Kieślowski as artistic regimentation of European consciousness in the face of historical change. These artists have managed to reproduce the quandaries of the Third World as it exists within the First World.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1 – Eva and Anna in America: Reconstructing East Central European Identity in Narratives of Exile .....	22
Chapter 2 – Bruno Schulz and the Evanescent Historical Moment .....	68
Chapter 3 – Between and Beyond Modernity: The Vernacular in the Works of Jan Jakub Kolski .....	113
Chapter 4 – Clandestine Human and Cinematic Passages in the United Europe .....	153
Epilogue .....	198
Works Cited .....	202

## Introduction

This project has been motivated by the reemergence of East Central Europe after decades of Soviet colonization as the middle ground between the East and the West. The proper recognition of this middle ground provides a way out of the Cold War polarity of conflicting ideologies as well as a constructive break in the current analytical paradigm that divides the world into First World and Third World countries. Reading and watching the texts that constitute the imaginary of the Second World will inadvertently alter and expand our canon of postcolonial literature, slowing down the post-1989 rush to seal the painful gaps and arrive at one, uniformly democratic, capitalist Europe.

On a personal level, this project is a result of my need to question the idea of Eurocentrism that the scholars who study the art and culture of peripheral Europe have to face in the context of the American academe. Since my arrival to the United States and the entrance to the Department of Comparative Literature at Stony Brook, I have been continuously wrestling with the North American concept of Europe. This imaginary Europe seems to consist of surprisingly few countries: France, Germany and England are at its core, surrounded by the somewhat less "European" Italy, Spain, the Benelux, and the countries of Scandinavia. This very "small" and homogenous Europe is most pronounced in the popular conception of "Europeanness," disseminated via the American commercial discourse. The goods that are advertised as European or European-style are supposed to appeal to the American consumer psyche as better, more reliable, and often luxurious. The concept of Europe that is attached to the 'European hair style' or the

'European furniture' refers to a uniform, alas illusory, land of traditional craftsmanship, sophistication of style, and civilized labor practices. It is the good Old World.

Similarly, on the level of scholarly discourse, Europe is designated as a territory of relative homogeneity. The Europe of Eurocentrism also consists of a very few countries, the same countries that are perceived as undoubtedly European by the local travel agents, and seems to encompass a culture that rose out of ancient Greece, Christianity, and the European colonization of other continents. In a sense, the very discourse of Eurocentrism contributes to the negative and exclusionary politics that it originally set out to criticize. In the hands of some postcolonial scholars, Eurocentrism functions as a way to congeal the dimensions of the enemy and crystallize the binary of the colonizing center and the colonized margins.

This clarifying conceptualizing strategy comes at a great price, however. Europe is reduced to a few politically and economically powerful nations. The intricacy of this continent's multilingual, multid denominational, and multicultural identity is greatly limited. The history of the European colonization of its own European margins is overlooked. The complex hierarchies that exist among the forty plus different European countries are erased. In *Provincializing Europe*, the highly celebrated text of postcolonial theory, Dipesh Chakrabarty criticizes European historicism for "the denial of coevalness" – the myopic vision of European philosophy and history, which limits the developments of capitalism, modernity and the Enlightenment to the geographic territory of Europe, ignoring the role of the overseas colonies, the "elsewhere," in this narrative of progress, and in the material wealth that benefits Europeans (8). At the same time as he resurrects the role of the "subaltern classes of the third world" in the discourse of modernity,



Chakrabarty buries the history of European margins (East Central Europe is one of them) and contributes to further idealization of “Europe.” In his introduction, he patently admits: “The Europe I seek to provincialize or decenter is an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in *clichéd and shorthand forms* in some everyday habits of thought” (3-4). By implication, this statement attests to Chakrabarty’s sense of the existence of the other Europe that does not need provincializing, and that the acknowledgement of this other, already de-centered, Europe somehow undermines the righteousness with which postcolonial scholarship carries out its task.

This dissertation focuses on one of the European peripheral territories – East Central Europe (other examples of internal colonies of Europe include the Baltic states, Ireland, or the Balkans) – in an effort to investigate and problematize the modern conception of Europe and the shifts in the awareness of its own identity. Through an analytical reading of a variety of literary and cinematic texts produced by artists from this region (often creating in exile), I illustrate the dynamic process of Europe negotiating its consciousness in the face of historical change. The investigation is multi-directional: the “peripheral visions” of my title suggest looking towards the periphery of East Central Europe for new energy in the project of reimagining Europe but also looking out, taking a sideways glance at the neighbor – Western Europe, in order to negotiate East Central Europe’s location on the border of the East and the West. Additionally, there are instances of looking back at East Central Europe from across the Atlantic Ocean and from behind the Iron Curtain: those are the voices of exile writers and directors who left East Central Europe for North America, Canada, and France. With the advantage of distance in space and time, these artists saw the contours of East Central Europe more clearly. They also

measured their vision against the local preconceptions about the region in order to re-translate its identity into a more intercultural formation, and not just a displaced Other.

Peripheral vision is the area of vision that lies just outside the line of direct sight. I argue that the texts that I have selected for analysis offer such a sphere of vision. These texts have never made it to the line of direct sight; they are never, or very seldom, included in the canon of world literature or world cinema. Various and complex reasons might explain this exclusion: linguistic barriers, political divisions, the misfortune of being categorized as neither European nor Russian, or maybe a more conscious choice, on the part of the artists, to inhabit the periphery, to celebrate the limited but enriching sovereignty of the still unassimilated spot. Periphery, in the works of some of these artists, is not just a place left behind; it is a place that protects itself from the equalizing forces of global capitalism. It is the periphery that survives the ideological movements geared to neutralize difference, e.g. communist internationalism or capitalist multiculturalism. It isn't the periphery striving for recognition by mounting chauvinistic and ethnocentric agendas in the course of a nationalist struggle. Although this kind of isolationist peripheral vision is gaining popularity in the actual politics of the region. Art, however, makes room for critical transformations of politics: "Literature, in particular, can offer models of nonconflictive cultural interaction that may prove more flexible and persuasive than those developed in political theory and practice" (Cornis-Pope 390). Literature and cinema, then, are treated as both a reflective surface, representing the reality of life in East Central Europe, and a canvas for creative intervention in the dominant discourse that seems to suggest the Second World's immediate Westernization after the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. *Peripheral Visions* is a work of cultural

preservation. As Charity Scribner suggests in her *Requiem for Communism*: “Yet today, when the forces of globalization are smoothing over Europe’s industrial wastelands, we can still keep hold of the second world’s cultural memory and claim its remainders as sites of reflection and resistance” (4).

East Central Europe, especially during its modern period, has been under direct influence of two powerful centers: the imperial forces of the West (Austro-Hungarian and Prussian Empires, and later the Nazi regime) and on the other side, the vast and aggressive Russian empire (later the communist Soviet Union). The term “East Central Europe” is itself relatively new and still debated among the scholars of the region. However, despite the controversy surrounding this term, it is easily observable in the discourse of contemporary politics that the term “East Central Europe” has gradually replaced “Eastern Europe,” which for decades grouped the countries of the Soviet block and legitimized their incorporation by communist Russia. “Eastern Europe” has been abandoned because it is a linguistic reminder of the communist propaganda’s insistence on the “organic ties” of these countries with the Russian culture (Wandycz 2). Geographically, the region in question is very fluid and might encompass Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania, but also Ukraine, Byelorussia, the Baltic states and the Balkans, depending on who is visualizing the parameters of the area. For the sake of this project, which deals with the cultural consciousness rather than the socio-economic status of East Central Europe, it is not necessary to define the exact borderlines. Cultural movements are seldom chartable and especially cultural movements among countries whose borderlines have always posited a challenge to cartographers.

In order to sift through the cultural expansion of the East and the West over this ever-fluctuating terrain and their impact on the identity formation of East Central Europe, *Peripheral Visions* employs some of the methodology and theory of postcolonial studies. The idea of East Central Europe as an object of colonization is a controversial one. There are some obvious similarities between the colonization of this region and the colonization of the Third World, mainly economic exploitation and military control. But there are also important differences that make East Central Europe a site of a unique colonialism. Mostly because, while under the occupation of the foreign forces, East Central European countries remained very conscious, if not overly conscious, of their national identities (Wandycz, Tötösy de Zepetnek). Historians hypothesize that this is so because the formation of modern statehood was already under way in those countries when Prussia, Russia and Austria decided to absorb them into their respective empires (from late eighteenth century on). When robbed of statehood, these countries continued to work out their identities by emphasizing their nationalities, through linguistic, artistic, and religious practices. These countries have enjoyed a relative independence in the area of creative expression. Consequently, they were able to interpolate foreign acculturation.

Furthermore, these countries, unlike most of the Third World countries that fell victim to colonization, were able to imagine their fate as common (a community of colonized nations) and accompanied by relative sovereignty (when often they had none) due to their common conviction about their own Europeanness, their peripheral Europeanness, but nevertheless one that carried an important weight. Although, both Western Europe and Russia had their appetites for the East Central European territory, they also wished this area to remain apart, as an insulating corridor. The importance of

this role as a buffering agent has been recognized by the countries in question and used to negotiate their shared identity.

From my perspective, the arguments about the difference between the colonization of the Second World and that of the Third World, rather than prohibit the postcolonial inquiry, provide points for analysis that could only enrich and problematize the area of postcolonial studies. Investigating centuries-old history of European colonization of its local, European, peripheries can only deepen our understanding of different forms of colonialism. Analyzing the methods of Soviet ideological colonialism of East Central Europe, on the other hand, allows us to shed more light on the most recent forms of cultural and economic imperialism – the surreptitious neo-imperialism – that does not necessarily involve military occupation and war for territorial domination. The fact that during the communist domination the countries of East Central Europe remained officially independent nation-states, with periodic incidents of Soviet military incursion, doesn't cancel out the hidden but painfully real pressures and limitations enforced by the foreign centers of power upon these countries.

In *Peripheral Visions*, I also address the blind spot in the theoretical focus of East Central European scholars who since 1989 have passionately devoted their attention to tracing the presence of postmodernism in the art of the region, often providing anachronistic readings of early twentieth-century East Central European literature as examples of postmodernism *avant la lettre* in an attempt to prove the cultural continuity between the region and the West (Deltcheva 590). The difficulty with which East Central European intellectuals admit to cultural influences exacted by the Soviet empire and the simultaneous enthusiasm for acknowledging Western influences is symptomatic of those

intellectuals' inability to dispose of the antagonizing discourse of the free West's victory over the totalitarian East. This blind spot is also a defensive stance that forbids acknowledging East Central Europe as dominated and enslaved in any way other than the superficial control of the centralized, Moscow-governed Communist Party. While such defensive rhetoric had its place during the actual times of Soviet domination, it should now be reevaluated in the face of neo-colonialism sponsored by the enlarging European Union.

When Milan Kundera wrote his seminal essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe," published in 1984 in *The New York Review of Books*, the purpose of differentiating East Central Europe from the ideological formation of Eastern Europe was paramount. It seemed at the time that the legacy of this multicultural region was being threatened by slow, almost imperceptible, assimilation into the vast dominion of Russified republics. Therefore, Kundera amplified the Western component in the region's identity, especially its cultural identity, almost as if beckoning the West to come and claim what was always legitimately Western. He spoke of the anti-communist uprisings in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland as "a drama of the West – a West that, kidnapped, displaced and brainwashed, nevertheless insists on defending its identity" (35).

In his impassioned plea for Western support, Kundera othered Russian civilization as fundamentally alien to the spirit of European egalitarianism and the political system of democracy, a civilization ultimately pursuing its long-standing imperial appetites. Kundera defined East Central Europe as a "family of small nations" living under continuous threat, aware that "their existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it" (33). Through this observation, he

pointed out to Western Europe the role of marginal Europeanness that should not be forgotten too easily. That is the only part of Kundera's reasoning that holds true today. If Europe is to become a sphere of intercultural contact and complex ethnic coexistence, it must pay increased attention to preserving the difference that these small nations bring into its fold. Kundera's other claims about East Central Europe's inherently Western identity or the alleged history of solidarity among the community of small nations were since then rightfully disclosed as dramatic exaggerations of an exiled novelist stepping into politician's shoes when situation got dire.

While taking into account the fact that postcolonial theorists speak from very specific locations (which often reflect their private positions on the border of their native postcolonial territory and the Anglo-American dominant culture that they now inhabit and speak from), and a cultural study of one group can rarely be applied to that of another, I borrow certain concepts from postcolonial theory and forsake others, depending on their applicability to the culture of East Central Europe. Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism informed my understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge that has dictated the Western Europe's image of its Eastern periphery as barbaric and irrational since the arrival of Romanticism. Larry Wolff's tracing the invention of Eastern Europe back to the Enlightenment, as Western Europe's most immediate savage Other, furthers Said's theory of Orientalism and provides *Peripheral Visions* with an account of the earliest history of ideological colonization of the region by its Western neighbor. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" sheds some light on the disturbing silence of the female voice in the conversations that the male East Central European artists have conducted on the subject of the region's identity vis-à-

vis equally male-dominated visions of Western Europe and/or post-Soviet Russia. When identifying East Central Europe as a “buffering corridor” between Western Europe and Russia, I reevaluate Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of “deterritorialization” in order to point out the crucial differences between the colonies located in the Third World and the colonies found in the Second World. In identifying East Central Europe’s imagined space, both the local rooted variant and its uprooted equivalent, I use Hamid Naficy’s concept of the “phobic space,” Yi-Fu Tuan’s formulation of place as a “field of care,” and Marc Augé’s notion of the “non-place.”

*Peripheral Visions* has greatly benefited from the work of the few East Central European scholars who have already begun applying the tools of postcolonial studies in analyzing East Central European culture. Anikó Imre’s feminist-informed critique of the Second World nationalism brings to the forefront the East Central European distortion of feminism – the so-called “state feminism,” which Imre defines as “the socialist state’s centralized social policies, whose goal was to control women in particular and the population in general by deepening the essentialist division of labor between the sexes and affirming the bond between compulsory heterosexuality and the nation-state” (xiv). Imre’s focus on the relationship between aesthetics and gender representation in East Central European art production has sensitized my own interpretations of this art towards politics of sexuality and sexuality of politics as they are played out in this region’s narratives. Katarzyna Marciniak’s recent explorations of “Second Worldness” with regard to transnational crossings (taking place in social reality and cultural representation) inspired my own commitment to preserving the particularity of the post-Soviet heritage in the new, globalizing world. Marciniak is puzzled by the unanimous and



“incessant stress on the idea that the ‘Second World is no more’” (6). *Peripheral Visions* contributes to Marciniak’s efforts to question the impulse to erase the interstitial space of Second Worldness by showing that this sphere is not just a reductive socio-political construct, but it reflects a difference stronger and older than the Cold War terminology, the difference that stubbornly persists in the era of European integration. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek’s theory of “filtered colonialism” – the secondary (ideological and cultural) colonization of East Central Europe during and after the Soviet communism – has validated my choice to treat East Central Europe as a postcolonial formation.

The methodology in this project combines close textual analysis with methods of cultural studies that focus on the context of the artistic production (historical circumstances, distribution, authorship, readership, and spectatorship) and the process through which a given text participates in culture (a simultaneous reflection and inculcation of the dominant ideology, as well as the text’s effort to point toward a change). The cultures of the countries that comprise East Central Europe continue to preserve their nationalistic principles, sometimes at the expense of democracy and tolerance, but in an apparent effort to spare its cultural identity from the aggressive globalization brought on after the dismantling of the Wall. The artists grouped in this project have questioned the global trends by creating the more local and private visions. In order to explore these expressions of regional culture, I resort to the discourses and methods of cultural archeology of knowledge and geography of space.

One kind of peripheral visions analyzed in this dissertation has managed to regiment the colonizing forces of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and will continue to counter global developments in the future, by assuming a distinctive style of

artistic representation. This aesthetic sensibility has been theorized as magic realism, hyperrealism or the fantastic, among other, less popular, categories that literary scholars have devised to refer to a counter-epistemological impulse that characterizes this stylistic mode. This counter-epistemological moment is the “hesitancy” of representational discourse between mimesis and allegory (Todorov in *The Fantastic*, Jameson in “*Magic Realism in Film*,” Derrida in “The Law of Genre,” and Freud in his notion of “psychical reality”). Aided by Stephen Slemon’s theory of magic realism as postcolonial discourse, I discuss this special sensibility as a non-genre, or anti-genre, that is used by the artists of East Central Europe as a way to escape the positivist ‘reality principle’ and to circumvent the aesthetic of modernism, and thus express the specificity and incommensurability of their condition. This project does not attempt to come into a debate with the Latin American theories of magic realism. It hopes to enrich the landscape of what is now considered magic realism and contribute to its understanding as an international phenomenon. It also hopes to confirm the validity of seeing magic realism as a representational strategy intrinsic to certain socio-cultural conditions, moments in history that arise at different parts of the world, often simultaneously. Some questions that are at the center of Latin American conceptions of magic realism are asked and investigated in this project as well, with the hope that the discoveries of the critics who researched and theorized the dynamics of Latin American magic realism can illuminate its occurrence in East Central European art. One such question echoes the old concern of the critics of Latin American magic realism: If both Americas are deeply influenced by colonial power struggle, multiple-race identity formations and mixing languages, why does magic realism have a significantly stronger presence in South America than in North America?

Can one draw a constructive parallel between these different Americas and possibly different Europes?

The other kind of peripheral visions that constitute primary sources for this dissertation are narratives of exile and displacement, including my own personal narrative that is woven into this text as a marginal story meant to keep the reader entertained, but mostly used as a strategy to preserve my own difference during the years of dutifully submitting myself to the rigors and expectations of American academia. Two East Central European authors, both living in exile in the West, Julia Kristeva and Eva Hoffman, have shown to me in their works how the public can and should always work with the private. Their work is an illustration of female creativity fueled by historic events but not sacrificed for the benefit of one ideology. The emphasis that these two authors place on the importance of psychic space and affect in one's intellectual pursuits inspired the tonality, the flow, and sometimes the stutter that the reader will detect on the pages of *Peripheral Visions*.

Like magic realist fiction, narratives of exile, literary or cinematic, are another breed of contemporary art to carry a salutary potential in today's conflicted ideological landscape of economic, religious and political terror. These narratives bear witness to a possibility, and lived actuality, of inhabiting an identity that is shaped by discontinuity and provisionality. Naficy talks about the "agonistic liminality of selfhood and location" that is characteristic of exilic subjects. He describes this hybrid formation as being stuck between dystopia and utopia:

This turns exile and transnationalism into a contentious state of syncretic impurity, intertextuality, even imperfection. They become moments of dialectical

vision, of sameness in difference, of continuity in discontinuity, of synchronicity in diachronicity. Emotionally, they are characterized by zeniths of ecstasy and confidence and nadirs of despondency and doubt. Finally, exile and transnationality are highly processual, discursive, and ambivalent. (124)

Throughout this dissertation the state of exile is explored as a condition that feeds creativity and self-conscious identity reconstruction, but also as a state that leads to devastating loss and violation of female bodies. The distance between Kristeva and Hoffman, on the one hand, and the anonymous East Central European women of all ages sold into sex slavery every day, on the other hand, is vast. *Peripheral Visions* makes room for the implicit comparison of these radically different narratives of displacement, while being aware of the uneven distribution of attention devoted to these contrasting experiences. When writing *Peripheral Visions*, I have realized how entering American academia as a woman and producing academic writing is a viable path to gaining a respected and respectful audience, which in turn validates my immigrant presence. But, at the same time, I still fail to see how my work and the agency deriving from it can possibly impact the lot of East Central European women illegally trafficked around the globe.

Literature and film are read side by side in four chapters devoted to different aspects of the East Central European cultural construction. I fuse cinema and prose in this project in order to get a broader scope of cultural production, but also to transcend the usual division between high art (literature) and popular art (cinema). I see cinema as a mode of representation that provides literature with a semiotic peripheral vision, and vice

versa. Furthermore, there are important differences in how film and literature utilize magic realism, and in turn shape the new European imaginary.

In the first chapter, I analyze three examples of East Central European identity reconstruction in exile: *Lost in Translation* – a memoir by Eva Hoffman, *Anna* – a 1987 film directed by Jurek Bogajewicz, and my own immigrant story.

Hoffman's memoir is as much a scrutinizing look into a difficult experience of exile as it is an account of a woman's struggle to confront societal expectations and cultural limitations inscribed in East Central European femininity. *Lost in Translation* provides a detailed account of the clash of this kind of femininity with the American, feminism-informed model. Hoffman documents the process of identity negotiation undergone by her Jewish-Polish mother and the one undertaken more consciously on her own. The pressures of immigration and the pressures of gender construction are shown to have compounded Hoffman's identity crisis. Despite a positive resolution of this crisis – Hoffman becomes a celebrated author, fully fluent in English, her second language, and in the cultural norms of her host country – the memoir registers a loss of eroticism, understood as the force that animates the place between our bodies and minds.

In my reading of *Lost in Translation*, I use the theory of Julia Kristeva to think through my own immigrant experience at the same time as I read through Eva Hoffman's attempt to perform her Western but also always Eastern identity. Kristeva's theory as well as her antagonizing stance towards Western feminism crystallizes the difference that life in East Central Europe enforced upon women who drove tractors under communism, yet were required, by the oppositional nationalist ideology, to perform traditional femininity. This femininity, based on motherhood and sacrifice, was used as a strategy to

counter the deadening effect of a totalizing regime. Paradoxically, women who performed it derived a certain amount of subversive clout, which of course did not fully compensate for the actual labor overload and salary underpay. I interpret Kristeva's emphasis on the importance of the semiotic in women's struggle to secure a stronghold in the sphere of the symbolic as her tribute to East Central European historical heritage, which put women in a schizophrenic tug-of-war between conflicting ideologies that gave them agency only to take it away.

*Anna* is a film produced in exile, by exiled filmmakers (Jurek Bogajewicz and Agnieszka Holland, who co-scripted the story), and it concerns the plight of a female exile, a Czechoslovak actress, living in New York City. My argument focuses on how this picture confronts the century-old stereotype of an Eastern European immigrant arriving at the shores of North America. The confrontation operates through a clever employment of meta-cinematic scenes which position the spectator within a *mise-en-abîme* structure, thus implementing a slow but methodical investigation of all the visual and performative aspects that constitute immigrant identity formation, taking place both willingly, inside the subject, and forcefully, impressed upon the subject by societal norms. The secondary preoccupation of this analysis deals with the ways in which the filmmakers' decision to explore issues regarding female immigration from East Central Europe challenge the dominant paradigm of a Cold War political dissident – always a male figure – as the key character in literary and cinematic discourse regarding the region.

In the second chapter, I analyze selected short stories of Bruno Schulz (1892-1942), a Galician author who perished during the Holocaust, vis-à-vis Franz Kafka's

writing. I argue that Schulz's stories utilize magic realism to reflect the complex socio-economic and cultural changes that the countries of East Central Europe were undergoing during his lifetime (the pre-WWII decades of the twentieth century). Those changes are connected with the region's transition into modernity. Schulz captures the shift that took place between the two World Wars in the *modus operandi* of European imperialism: a transformation from a mostly military domination of the colonies into the economic dependency between the First World powers and the countries still operating in the pre-capitalist agrarian economy.

Schulz's story "The Street of Crocodiles" (published in 1934) is a story of a small Jewish/Polish mercantile town that has just been freed from the domination of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, only to fall into the trap of modern economic imperialism – the oil industry. The story is brimming with genuine historicity of a dream finally realized. The moment of the nation's political revival (Poland regaining its independence in 1918) and its economic development is captured in its flimsy provisional shape, in its illusive, hard-to-believe presence. Using magic realism, Schulz depicts objective phenomena, with painstaking clarity and precision, simultaneously disclosing their strangeness to those who experience them. He captures what to Franz Roh (the German critic who first theorized magic realism in 1925, Berlin) was the essence of magic realism – "[t]he clash of true reality and the apparent reality."

Schulz shows how the cheap trimmings that the oil business imposes on the town turn from make-believe to a pervasive and constant fixture in the landscape. But, then, as the story progresses, the marks of modernity begin to disappear again, the town regresses to its time- and tradition-honored mercantilism. This town's sudden transformations, its

appearances and disappearances, its simultaneous being and non-being, allow the reader to sense the unique properties of the land onto which the modernization is being grafted. This place invites Western influences but not without the ironic distancing. *Peripheral Visions* focuses on Schulz's talent to "retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 255). This man, the subject of the vision (and the narrator in the story), is an East Central European, a Polish Jew, remembering the old world governed by the Emperor Franz Josef and anticipating the fast approaching machinery of Nazism.

The third chapter is completely devoted to the cinema of Jan Jakub Kolski in an effort to discuss the role of the provincial countryside in the East Central European imaginary. Kolski's post-communist films show the tension between the village and the city. Kolski both celebrates and criticizes the endangered way of life that the village people still manage to enjoy. In his films the conflict between the slow-pace daily existence and the turbulent forces of history come to the forefront. Kolski problematizes the entrance of technology capitalism to the provinces. He also contrasts two modes of spirituality: the popular folk beliefs and the often inflated religious mysticism, as well as the two modes of sexuality: the magical conception of bodily love and the "scientia sexualis" of modern life. Kolski skillfully deconstructs the aforementioned binaries in order to reevaluate the meaning of the periphery and mark its importance in the cultural landscape of the region.

Characteristically, Kolski employs magic realism, and for that reason he has been accused of a-historical escapism. I argue to the contrary: Kolski uses this stylistic strategy successfully to illustrate the historical change as something that stems from the



individual's acute awareness of his/her interiority with regard to history. Magic realism, through the camera of this artist, is the best way to represent the region's transition into modernity as a process of rare intensity, the completion of which is being continuously questioned by the people affected by it – the members of the intimate village collectivities.

Kolski's films are of particular interest for this dissertation for two reasons. First, they engage history in a non-glossy, non-epic way, and thus present the territory of East Central Europe as emerging and filled with energizing change. Kolski presents the past to evoke intense visual pleasure, but not nostalgia. The colors and textures in his films evoke the “structural disjunction of historical raw material” that Fredric Jameson considers to be the most important feature of magic realism in film. By emphasizing material reality, and especially one that is full of dissonance, this cinematic style draws attention to the changing modes of production, to the “production still locked in conflict with traces of the older mode” (Jameson 311), the past fused with the present. The second reason for including Kolski's work in this project is to draw attention to this artist's marginal status within the cinema of East Central Europe. Unlike Wajda, Kieślowski or Szabó, Kolski has been consciously apolitical. He managed, however, to represent a historical reality. His films often focus on the passage of time and on the historicity of truth. They capture the transience of being a colonial subject.

Krzysztof Kieślowski's *White* (1993), Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976), Lukas Moodysson's *Lilja 4Ever* (2002), and Franco de Peña's *Your Name Is Justine* (2005) are used in the final chapter as examples of the artistic representation of the changing post-Wall European space. All of these texts are concerned with moving across

Europe and traversing real and imagined boundaries that continue to divide the continent into sections of privilege and destitution. In my discussion of these passages, I point out their clandestine character, despite the official discourse of “Europe without borders.”

Kieślowski’s *White* is analyzed here as a symbolic rift in the *Color Trilogy* – *magnum opus* about the unification of Europe. In this portion of the trilogy, Kieślowski gives the European ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity a satirical treatment, anticipating continued separation of Europe and its Eastern periphery long after the enlargement of the European Union. *White* re-charts the flow of immigration and capital in the new era and signals the surreptitious forces of neo-colonialism that are steadily replacing the Soviet domination in East Central Europe. As a Polish-French co-production, I read Kieślowski’s work as an early example of the European variety of transnational cinema, the fastest growing trend in cinema production today, which aims at producing politically and socially engaged art that deals with issues brought on by the development of complex international dependencies responsible for the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor regions of the world.

Both Kieślowski’s *White* and Polanski’s *The Tenant* are preoccupied with East Central European masculinity and its crisis in exile. The main character in *The Tenant*, Trelkowski, is a Polish-Jewish immigrant renting a flat in Paris. His increasing entrapment and isolation in Paris reflect the immigrant experience, and more specifically the East Central European male immigrant experience. Trelkowski subjects himself to a gradual spectacle of emasculation that seems to be enforced upon him by the physical environment and his Parisian neighbors. Polanski depicts Western Europe as claustrophobic and alienating. Karol Karol, the protagonist in *White*, undergoes a similar

spectacle, but this time enacted in a public space, a French court of justice. Each character compromises a very important aspect of his existence in an effort to belong in Europe. Ultimately neither succeeds. Trelkovski commits suicide and Karol Karol returns to Poland in a bizarre enactment of clandestine travel, reduced to an inanimate object.

Reduction of East Central European humanity is the theme of Moodysson's and de Peña's films, which comment on the proliferation of sex slavery after the explosion of the free market economy in the post-Soviet territory. Trade in human beings and modern practice of slavery are two aspects of European reality that are intentionally ignored by the European Union administration as well as the East Central European governments whose female subjects are sold into slavery. Shifting of the blame between the Eastern suppliers of human merchandise and the Western clients results in silence and legal impasse. In terms of artistic representation of this social crisis, transnational cinema proves the best medium for bringing the issue from its discursive obscurity to the attention of an international public. Transnational cinema, itself a form of clandestine practice overlooked by film scholars who still focus on European national cinemas, is best equipped to capture the crimes of European sex industry without framing those crimes within one ideology, thus domesticating and neutralizing the problem. By juxtaposing Moodysson's one-sided depiction of sex slavery as a result of the post-Soviet economic impotence with de Peña's multifaceted and condemnatory portrayal of organized crime units that rely on international cooperation across borderless and democratic Europe, I show transnational cinema's superior stance in addressing the local problems as they result from global market compression.

## Chapter 1

### **Eva and Anna in America: Reconstructing East Central European Identity in Narratives of Exile**

“Linguistic dispossession is a sufficient motive for violence, for it is close to the dispossession of one’s self. Blind rage, helpless rage is rage that has no words—rage that overwhelms one with darkness.”

- *Eva Hoffman*

“The peoples of East Central Europe make their own history, although they do not make it just as they please.”

- *Timothy Garton Ash*

\*

While reading Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* for the first time, there were moments when I needed to put the book aside, because I became embarrassed at its public revelation of my deepest emotional knots which I believed had been unique to my situation as an exile in the United States. In precise and elegant English (her second language), Hoffman managed to say it all. The things that I stubbornly insisted were unspeakable in a foreign language were there in black and white, on the pages of her autobiography subtitled “A Life in a New Language.” “She has arrived,” I thought, repressing envy. She mastered English to the point that she could use it to relate her painful but also triumphant tale of entrance into a new language and a new identity. Her narrative voice has bridged the voice of the translator with that of the author, the conflict

between the two languages has been smoothed over, and thanks to her writing there are witnesses to a remarkable feat of will and perseverance.

Hoffman's story is so much my story that I fear it will find me (the critic) speechless too often. Still, I try. This attempt calls for a double translation on my part. First, I need to dress my reading impressions into English. Second, I want to translate my experience of reading about Hoffman's struggle into theory (and from theory back to experience). I know that this practice will somehow sanction my own life in a new language.

\*

*Lost in Translation* is an account of Eva Hoffman's emigration from her native Kraków, Poland, to Vancouver, Canada, and finally New York City. Her family's exile from Poland in 1959, when Eva was only thirteen, initiates three very long decades of life in translation. At the end of that transitional period, Eva apparently acquires full proficiency in a new language (English) along with what Julia Kristeva calls the 'taste' of language. Kristeva is another East Central European émigré whose writing in French, her second language, has offered a revelation of possibilities for someone convinced about the ultimate handicap of living, working and loving in a foreign language. Her theories seem to be fueled by the same tribulations that motivate Hoffman's writing and which feed my pesky insecurities. I first encountered Kristeva's thought when reading her theory of the foreigner as the center of otherness present in all of us (*Strangers to Ourselves*). Her argument forced me out of the miserable but safe fortress of foreignness, which, all too often, I used as a pretext for victimization. Not only did Kristeva write about this sort of cowardice, but in the age of maddening political correctness, she dared

to condemn it – “just because one is a foreigner does not mean one is without one’s own foreigner” and point out that “the foreigner excludes before being excluded, even more than he is being excluded” (282). This was a warning that came in time to lift me from the self-aggrandizing inertia of my island. Besides, in her words I detected the confrontational bluntness so typical of East Central European discursive ‘taste,’ which I still find quite endearing. I hear Mother’s voice on the phone telling me to get my act together – America is not Siberia for God’s sake! And no one forced you to leave...

In “Bulgaria, My Suffering,” Kristeva develops the concept of linguistic ‘taste’ which has to accompany any proper application of language. Kristevan ‘taste’ is her reformulation of the socio-linguistic conventions that enable a group of people (but also each individual within it) to recognize and respect common meanings behind given signifiers and various constellations of these signifiers. ‘Taste’ is the ‘rhetoric’ of language, Kristeva suggests, but as her metaphor of taste (flavor on the tongue) implies, this ‘rhetoric’ operates on an almost subcutaneous, bodily level. Taste is a convention that became us.

Eva learns the new linguistic code and the conventions that provide its social context. She climbs the acme of assimilation to a foreign culture not only by completing her education within the American system — receiving a PhD from Harvard — but also by securing for her immigrant voice the highest forum of expression, a column in *The New York Times*. However, before that happens, the reader of this autobiography witnesses a long and sinuous trajectory of Hoffman’s inscription into the new language and the new identity. Hoffman’s decision to become a writer and not a concert pianist (the career for which she had been trained since her early childhood) provides a fertile

context for the analysis of her identity reconstruction in exile. Intricate connections exist among music, language and the erotic in the narrative, as well as in Eva's transforming self. These connections illuminate the nature of translation and its significance for securing a livable space in exile. But what became lost in the process?

What is the loss that the title of Hoffman's autobiography so emphatically asserts, despite the narrative's seeming closure and celebration of successful transition into a foreign culture? (Most critics note that Hoffman's account of her life in a new language is overall celebratory and therapeutic<sup>1</sup>) One might look for the answer to this question in the narrator's ambiguous treatment of the figure of her mother. Not unlike Kristeva's foreigner, Hoffman is an exile who is a "stranger to *her* mother." This foreigner, Kristeva explains, "...does not call her (the mother), he asks nothing of her. Arrogant, he proudly holds on to what he lacks, to absence, to some symbol or other" ("Tocatta and Fugue for the Foreigner" 267). The narrator of *Lost in Translation* achieves her entry into foreign language at the cost of once again silencing the semiotic maternal body within her own self. The achievement is all the more challenging since a foreign language is the epitome of the paternal idiom: it is in a sense a meta-language, a register reminding you with every other word of the artifice and inscription involved in communication, and twice removed from the affective reality.

---

<sup>1</sup> Eva Karpinski interprets Hoffman's autobiography as a tale of "symbolic empowerment" that is fueled by "Polish romanticism, with its individualistic cult of the difficult, artistic personality, and American pragmatism, with its Horatio-Algerian reverence for the self-made hero" (128). William Proefriedt points out Hoffman's celebration of her outsider position as enabling her to assume multiple perspectives, which in turn promote her intellectual strength (86). Jerzy Durczak, although acknowledging the ambiguities in the narrative, perceives Eva's odyssey as "victory over the language" (29). Similarly, Mary Besemeres remarks, "Hoffman is less often ambivalent about her bicultural experience than she is ambidextrous, her right hand as aware as it can be of what her left is secretly writing" (344).

In “Motherhood According to Bellini” and “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva associates the maternal body with the semiotic (and not the symbolic) element of signification. It is that which escapes the law of the Father, but also that which endangers the formation of child’s subjectivity and her/his successful entrance into the Symbolic order of language. Kristeva argues that for centuries the echo of the maternal body (her materiality and her *jouissance*) has been muted by the more or less sublimated discourses of Western cultural production. The maternal body, however, will always appear as the “return of the repressed.” The sublimated, symbolic mother (the Virgin in the Catholic imaginary) will never substitute for the abject maternal body, which is both abhorred and desired by the subject that emerged and cut herself/himself from that very body.

Hoffman strives to silence the abject mother in order to accomplish her translation project. Her mother, who will always question her daughter’s all-too-smooth metamorphosis from a Polish-Jewish girl into an American girl (146), is pushed to the margins of the narrative. While every other aspect of Eva’s youth and adulthood receives a thorough analysis in her new language, her mother is relegated to the realm of feelings that still lack signification: “My mother stays close to herself, as she stays close to home. She pays a price for her lack of self-alienation—the price of extremity, of being in extremis, of suffering. She can only be herself; she can’t help that either. She doesn’t see herself as a personage; she’s not someone who tells herself her own biography” (270). Isn’t the price mentioned here also the price of the daughter’s severance from her mother tongue? Eva can write her autobiography at the expense of erasing her mother’s (mother tongue’s) painful story. One wonders whether the mother doesn’t see herself as a



personage, as Hoffman suggests, or perhaps the daughter can only see the mother as the gravity-center of the house space, the speechless matriarch, the suffering Virgin:

My mother cannot imagine tampering with her feelings, which are the most authentic part of her, which are her, she suffers her emotions as if they were forces of nature, winds and storms and volcanic eruptions. She is racked by the movements of passion—*passio*, whose meaning is suffering. Her vulnerability is so undefended that it is a road to a kind of strength. My mother has the knowledge of the powerless. (269)

In opposition to Hoffman's own emotional ordeals, which are carefully delineated and translated into language, her mother's melancholy is presented in the narrative as an emotional torrent that cannot be verbalized. This maternal suffering is depicted as Freudian throes of melancholia (a body *racked* by *motions* of passion), while the daughter's experience of loss takes shape of controlled mourning.<sup>2</sup> Eva's mourning, steeped in newly acquired language, stands out against her mother's 'plaints.' In time, Hoffman pushes her mother to the outskirts of her existence. Towards the end of the autobiography, she admits to having disembodied the mother: "She becomes the mother-in-my-head, a figment in my psyche and imagination with which I struggle mightily and in a vacuum... As it is, the drama has become psychodrama; in battling her, I battle ghosts, and those have the tendency to become both bigger and more insubstantial than life" (267). Paradoxically, while Eva invests a lot of her energy in self-analysis (she also

---

<sup>2</sup> In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud defines melancholia and mourning as two mechanisms working according to a similar principle—the feeling of profound pain, after the loss of a loved object, causes one to withdraw from the outside world and to invest her/his mental energy in remembering the lost object. However, Freud explains, while mourning is an expected trauma that follows the loss of a loved object (it expires in time), melancholy is a pathological condition that resembles mourning in every aspect but it also triggers deep disturbance of self-respect in the subject suffering the loss.

undergoes psychotherapy), when thinking about her mother, she prefers to leave her in the hazy realm of phantoms.

When relating one of the conversations that she had with her Polish friends about the difference between Polish and American mothers, Eva tends to side with her friends (instead of trying to dismiss their stereotyping views on this cultural difference) in a common ridicule of the Americans' psychoanalytic preoccupation with their mothers:

My American friends pay their mothers the indirect tribute of incessant and highly subtle scrutiny. They measure the exact weight the mother exercises upon their psyche, and they practice careful equilibrating acts between letting the mother too much in and keeping her too much out. In their accounts, the mother comes out both extremely close and remote, as if she were both a vampiric incubus and a puzzling stranger. (265)

The Polish mother, in contrast, is seen as a domesticated and asexual creature who is “as familiar as the slippers in which she shuffles around the apartment” (266). Hoffman joins in a critique of one cultural construct in order to preserve another. When she says that the air around the Polish mother “isn't charged with gothic menace” she denies her own haunted relationship to her Polish mother (266).

The ghosts that Hoffman occasionally battles come to her from outside of her translated identity; they sneak in through various cracks in her symbolic fortress that she is busily constructing. They appear in dreams. It is during those vulnerable moments that the reader gets a glimpse of Hoffman's own melancholia. Significantly, the recurring dream during her childhood is that of the Baba Yaga (the Phallic Mother of Slavic mythology), a half witch, half benevolent grandmother, who possesses all knowledge.

When seeing the image of this pantheistic mother, Hoffman cannot discern if Baba Yaga is an independent creature or a part of her own body. The boundaries are blurred, as in the case of an infant and the mother's body: "Perhaps, though, I am her. Perhaps I have been on the earth a long, long time and that's why I understand the look in her eyes... perhaps I am being dreamt by a Baba Yaga who has been here since the beginning of time and I am seeing from inside her ancient frame..."(6). This oppressive but somehow desirable female figure has to be what Kristeva called the abject mother: the mother who loves and shelters but also threatens the child's emergence as an independent subject and she thus undergoes expulsion. Hoffman's dream, like so many of my own nighttime visitations with Mother, evokes her ambiguous relationship with her mother, her simultaneous identification with the mother along with the defilement of her, in this case through the folkloric figure of a witch.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the time, with Mother being thousands of miles away, I feel safe. The miles that separate us also bring us closer together. Do I keep running (from Białystok to Warsaw, Amsterdam, Budapest, and finally New York) so that one day, today, I can have a conversation with her on a friendly footing? With my mother tongue steadily atrophying, the conversation becomes friendlier every time we talk. We now spend hundreds of dollars on our cross-Atlantic weather chats. In talking to each other, we have not raised our voices for the last nine years. Yet, our exchanges *feel* more meaningful and direct than the frenzied disputes of the past. By taking on a different language than Hers, I am minimizing the chances when She and I can collapse into rapture or hatred. She

---

<sup>3</sup> In "From Filth to Defilement," Kristeva posits the importance of the symbolic matricide in opposition to Freud's insistence on the formative role of patricide in constructing the social. Defilement is defined here as rituals that patriarchal cultures employ to silence the repressed female at whose cost the patriarchal order was built. Kristeva explains, "The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother" (254).

knows neither the code of my work nor that of my love. I find myself working scrupulously not to be Mother's daughter. Simultaneously, I search around looking for her surrogate; tirelessly fleeing from Mother and at the same time expecting her watchful presence.

I find a trace of this presence in Eva Hoffman; as much as I identify with Eva, she functions as the ideal image against which I measure myself, whom I imitate in order to hear myself. Her memoir is a story that Mother could not provide. Eva takes the road that Mother would not care to travel. I follow this road. I have devoted years of my life to academic work, which helps me to become more eloquent about issues that Mother has no need to discuss. She believes that my academic career resulted from a capricious decision not to start a family. I believe it resulted from a deliberate rejection of her family.

Besides being the prototype of an archaic mother, Baba Yaga, from Eva's childhood dreams, is a symbol of unrestrained female sexuality. Hoffman will often complain about the regime of "asceticism" that she imposed on herself as an exiled teenager and the need to become "immune to desire" (136). One might speculate that along with her maternal body, Eva's own body is subject to the ritual of defilement. During a high school dance, she broods about her aborted desire for pleasure: "I'd like to give myself up to the music; ...I want so much to throw myself into sex, into pleasure. But instead, I feel that small movement of prim disapproval. This is 'unnatural,' I decide—a new word of opprobrium in my vocabulary, and one that I find myself applying to any number of situations I encounter"(130). Eva strives to assimilate into Canadian youth culture, and she diligently learns its language. However, as this happens,

a strange pull away from the materiality of her body takes place. She would like to follow her drives, but her new ego has to finish the task of constructing itself in the foreign code.

At the moment, she cannot afford a second of dissolution into pleasure, because her identity is still being translated into the new language. Hoffman's speech, at this point, is separated from the ease and genuineness of a native speaker; it is an arduous construction of a new signifying system:

My speech, I sense, sounds monotonous, deliberate, heavy—an aural mask that doesn't become me or express me at all. This willed self-control is the opposite of real mastery, which comes from a trust in your own verbal powers and allows for a free *streaming* of speech, for those *bursts* of spontaneity, the quickness of response that can rise into pleasure and *overflow* in humor. Laughter is the lightning rod of play, the eroticism of conversation; for now, I've lost the ability to make the sparks fly. (118, my emphasis)

At this point, Eva starts experiencing a disconnection of her self from the language she is using. (But it is this feeling of severance that will eventually enable her to complete her transition into English.) Sexuality and language are intimately linked in this passage. The house of the new language is being erected on the ruins of Hoffman's mother tongue, with the accompaniment of the muted sounds of her blocked drives. Here, the narrative tells the story of decorporealization.

The self-discipline that Eva describes is a necessity on the road to mastery of language, which in turn allows for sublimation of desire, for harnessing and preserving Eros, for adding one more ornament at his already opulent altar. By the time I complete my own initiation into English, I am convinced that being a novice in language can both

inhibit and fuel eroticism. The distance separating the novice from the full extent of language's law breeds linguistic foreplay. In privacy, I feel free to juggle the English words, toss them around, and crossbreed them, without the censorship that makes similar flights of fancy impossible in Polish without making a statement. Being transported into a new language lifts one, if only for a brief interval, from the prohibitions of the mother tongue, inviting frivolous game before the new laws set in. In fact they never do set in for good. In the most intimate moments English words cease to mean, my attachment to them is reversible. I easily break the pact that obligates me to mean what I say, and in place of words I hear a rush of delightfully alien syllables taking flight and lifting me along.

In order to express her thoughts, Eva puts herself in a state of an all-consuming alertness, to the degree that it causes a split between the semiotic and the symbolic registers of her signifying effort. Kristeva insists on an ebb-and-flow relationship between the semiotic (the heterogeneous non-meaning of music and melody) and the symbolic (the judgment-enabling meaning) required for signification. Signification could not happen by means of only one of these two dispositions. She emphasizes the "necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both" ("The Semiotic and the Symbolic" 34). Eva's speech, devoid of "streaming," "bursts," and "overflowing" becomes a perfect but empty chain of signification, with the symbolic taking the absolute rule over the semiotic.

Eva's erotic paucity, in both her new-found language and her relationships with people, reminds one of what Kristeva defined as the "melancholy sexuality" of the female, who in order to properly identify herself as a woman needs to identify herself with the object of its own abjection—the maternal body. Kelly Oliver aptly explicates this concept:

Kristeva argues that feminine sexuality is more likely to be a depressive sexuality because it is more difficult for women to commit the necessary matricide...

Because of a woman's bodily identification with the maternal body it is difficult for her to kill the maternal body without also killing herself. For women, matricide does not ward off suicide. For women matricide is a form of suicide.

A woman cannot properly mourn the lost object. She cannot get rid of the maternal body. (63)

Eva, in the process of learning English and forgetting Polish (at least temporarily), loses the vital connection to her body, as if she was committing a linguistic suicide. Laughter, the powerful performance that forms a junction between one's body and language, is unavailable to her. Eva, when conversing with people in English, is often prone to erase her body: "...the mat look in their eyes as they listen to me cancels my face, flattens my features...People look past me as we speak" (147). Perhaps she cannot properly "mourn" the lost language because with it she has relinquished hold of her melodious voice, something she had cherished as a child. Very early within the narrative, the reader has the pleasure of listening to little Eva play with the words' sonorous magic:

*"Bramaramaszerymery, rotumotu pulimuli,"* I say in a storytelling voice, as if

I were starting out a long tale, even though I know perfectly well that what I am

making up are nonsense syllables...I want to tell a Story, Every Story, everything all at once, not anything in particular that might be said through the words I know, and I try to roll all sounds into one, to accumulate more and more syllables. There is a hidden rule even in this game, though—that the sounds have to resemble real syllables, that they can't disintegrate into brute noise, for then I wouldn't be talking at all. I want articulation—but articulation that says the whole world at once. (11)

Little Eva's joyful engagement with language anticipates her later creative experiments with words. Although already fully initiated into language, Eva voluntarily 'returns' to the times when her 'speech' meant everything and nothing. Emitting syllable-clusters, sounds that observe a pattern, gives her pleasure akin to the erotic rhythms that govern the pre-Oedipal delight of a child nursing on her mother's breast.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that the sounds are nonsensical, they somehow echo a Story. Listening to a few tones of the Story's melody, which attempts to articulate the "whole world," makes the reader of Hoffman's autobiography realize that the story she is reading is somehow incomplete. Eva, who in the first part of the narrative (when still a child in Kraków) is obsessed with the music of language, becomes preoccupied with the Kristevan 'taste' of language after her entrance into English. The reader wonders what her story would be like if the erotic connection to her native tongue was not interrupted by her emigration. Eva herself is aware of this loss: "Is it right that I should neglect the demands of my emotions, which

---

<sup>4</sup> Kristeva interprets such articulatory experiments as following: "A return to oral and glottal pleasure combats the superego and its linear language, which is characterized by the subject/predicate sequences of its syntagms. Suction or expulsion, fusion with or rejection of the mother's breast seem to be at the root of this erotization of the vocal apparatus and, through it, the introduction into the linguistic order of an excess of pleasure" ("Negativity: Rejection" 80).



tell me that music is the medium of myself? No, a voice within me says—but it’s a voice I try to silence. It may by now be a false siren” (159).

The motivations behind the losses and gains of Eva’s reinscription into a foreign language and her increasingly passive engagement with music are complex. As a child, she loves music and endures long hours of daily piano practice in order to produce a melody that is “a wholly adequate language of the self—(her) self, everyone’s self” (72). Her mother invests money and time to help Eva acquire this language. The mother religiously takes her daughter to concerts (Arthur Rubinstein’s concert in Kraków provides Eva with a cathartic experience) and encourages her child to sit through long radio sessions, during which Eva follows the annual concerts of the Chopin Competition. At that time Eva is quite certain that music will aid her in the project of articulating the “whole world”—“...I am meant to speak this language; life wouldn’t be complete without it. Music begins to take the shape of Fate, or Destiny—a tremendously powerful magnet toward which my life will be inevitably moving” (72).

The language of literature and music coexist symbiotically during Eva’s childhood. The books she voraciously reads provide her with the “heightened form” of the world (28). They also allow her to build a unique and individual connection to outside reality, which is based on Eva’s engagement with words: “Sometimes, when I find a new expression, I roll it on the tongue, as if shaping it in my mouth gave birth to a new shape in the world” (29). She seeks a material amalgamation that would bind the world with the word. The act of verbal articulation seems to provide that sort of bond. Correspondingly, music, although it paradoxically requires the mastery of craft, lets Eva experience an immediate connection with others. She reflects, “Music seems as lucid to me as books, as

that moment in the park when everything was rolled into one, as the times when I feel a brimming love for my sister or for Marek. It speaks to me about everything in pearly, translucent sounds” (68). For Eva, at that time, sounds transcend signification. They operate in a mode of representation that exceeds itself. The rhythm of music and literature surmount pure meaning-making and somehow intimate the forces that Eva associates with love and the feeling of borderless reality. Music has a “definite erotic tinge” for the adolescent girl, and it is what Eva calls the “music’s fatal lure” that consolidates her decision to become a concert pianist (79).

It is only after Eva is thrown in the midst of a foreign culture that the dream of a life in music starts disintegrating. Despite the impoverishment of her family in exile, the parents scrape up enough money to pay for Eva’s piano lessons. However, this does not prevent the girl’s instinctual move away from the language of rhythm. Eva is in desperate need of verbal signification—Polish, the language that enabled her communication with the outside world but also used to be the solid structure of signs that Eva would employ to talk to herself about the centrifugal reveries of music (and her emotions) that she so passionately experienced, is suddenly inadequate:

The worst losses come at night...I wait for the spontaneous flow of inner language which used to be my nighttime talk with myself, my way of informing the ego where the id had been. Nothing comes. Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shriveled from sheer uselessness...This interval before sleep used to be the time when my mind became both receptive and alert, when images and words rose up to consciousness, reiterating what had happened during the day, adding the day’s experiences to those already stored there, spinning out the thread of my personal

story. (107)

It is realizations like this, arrived at in the quiet of one's bedroom, that confirm one of the most disquieting facts about human identity: its total and utter dependence on the codified exchange with the other. Like most of us, Eva used her native language to consolidate her identity. It was her bedtime ritual, an observance needed for all disparate facets of her selfhood to coalesce (every night repeating the same movements) into what looked like a hard crystal, but was in fact an elaborate formation of fields of energy tied together by words, the words already worn out by countless other individuals, and without which the precious knots of energy would remain just that.

Looking for verbal signification, Eva precariously forsakes music. In a dialogue, which resembles the discourse of a schizophrenic, the Polish Eva argues with her foreign counterpart about the role of music in Eva's future:

-- Should you become a pianist? the question comes in English.

-- No, you mustn't. You can't.

-- Should you become a pianist? the question echoes in Polish.

-- Yes, you must. At all costs.

-- The costs will be too high. (English)

-- The costs don't matter. Music is what you're meant to do.

-- I live here now. I can't just close my eyes and follow my passions, I have to figure out how to live my life...I like literature a lot. I'm good at it. Perhaps someday I can write. Sometimes, I almost get the same high...

-- Not the same. Nothing else expresses as much... (200)

During this exchange the reader witnesses Eva's psychological drama that revolves around her being faithful to the ideals of childhood. It is also the first time within the narrative that Eva seriously considers becoming a writer. The circumstances of her life pushed her to become even more conscious of language than she had ever been. While looking for self-expression, Eva insists that the only way to find it is through mastering her command of English and not through performing music.

At first, Eva's non-native proficiency in English obstructs her reception of literary works. When reading in English she experiences "desiccating alchemy" of words that are totally detached from things (107). In order to overcome this estrangement, Eva devotes herself to the "intellectual passion—or perhaps a passion for the work of the intellect" (183). She studies her new language relentlessly: "I've become obsessed with words. I gather them, put them away like a squirrel saving nuts for winter, swallow them and hunger for more. If I take in enough, then maybe I can incorporate the language, make it part of my psyche and my body" (216). She memorizes lists of words and learns American idioms, hoping that she can "re-create, from the discrete particles of words, that wholeness of a childhood language that had no words" (217). However, as hard as she tries, Eva cannot find the melody of that all-encompassing ideal idiom.

When she tries to recover the music of language, she encounters barriers. On one of the picnic excursions, during her second year at Harvard, Eva, who by now speaks perfect English, reflects on her inability to "regress" to childhood word games together with her American peers who happily engage in those:

Somebody in the front seat begins to sing "I'm Walking in the Rain,"

and everyone joins in, then eliding into "Poetry in Motion" and a Little Richard

song. I hum along without the words. There are certain gaps in my American education I'll, sadly enough, never make up...I'm always slightly uncomfortable about these rituals of regression, because I can't regress to the same place...(214)

When among native speakers, Eva is still reminded that the music of language that she committed herself to possess is beyond her reach. Despite the fact that her writing in English earns her awards and public recognition, her spoken stories fall short of her friends' riff-like tales—"this slip-and-slide speech, like jazz, or action painting"(219). When Eva attempts to tell a story her "throat tightens" and "paralysis threatens" (219). Her voice, the potential instrument of the music of language, is "...still a highly unreliable instrument. At the oddest moments it betrays (her), buckles, rasps, refuses to go on...shifts location to someplace high within (her) throat" (218). Eva admits to having lost her own voice and allowing the voices of others to speak for her and through her. The bitter example of this is when she marries her first husband, seduced by his "bebop speech," hoping that his voice can "carry (her) right into the heart of America" (219). She is disappointed when this does not happen. The *articulation* that she had dreamed of as a girl happens only on rare occasions.

But Eva's persistence does eventually make the music appear. After years of teaching American literature, she is finally granted the feeling of harmony that she had been awaiting for so long. When reading aloud stanzas from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to her students, Eva experiences an epiphany:

...now, suddenly I'm attuned, through some mysterious faculty of the mental ear, to their inner sense; I hear the understated melancholy of that refrain, the civilized restraint of the rhythms reigning back to more hilly swells

of emotion...Bingo, I think, this is it, the extra, the attribute of language over and above function and criticism. I'm back within the music of the language, and Eliot's words descend on me with a sort of grace. (186)

Language and the erotic also finally coalesce. After years of fighting her body in order to speak her self, Eva allows the language to enter the body and search for the melody in it. Divorced from her first husband, she finds her voice when making love to her new partner: "We speak, my lover and I, until words tumble out without obstacle, until they deliquesce into pure flow, until they become the air we breathe, until they merge with our flesh" (246).

Ultimately, Hoffman writes down her tale in a prose that proves her successful translation into English. The narrator's language is harmonious and graceful. However, the sporadic schizoid dialogues between the two Evas punctuate the narrative with uncomfortable but also dramatically insightful reveries. Eva's love for music, although now pushed to the background of her existence, reverberates in the autobiography's countless music-inspired tropes (e.g., "harmonica of infectious laughter," "tenor of her mind," someone whispers "*pianissimo*" or explains things "sotto voce") and recurrent lyrical evocations. Infrequently but forcefully, the narrator reminds the reader that her seamless English prose comes from a stranger; Polish words (*polot* for the English panache and *tesknota* for nostalgia) produce jolts of foreign intonation, moments of otherness that prevent the melody from becoming too domesticated and too static. Furthermore, as Mary Besemeres observes, the structure of the narrative mimics that of a musical piece: "Rather than maintaining an impression of chronology, however, the structure is thematic, in the manner of a musical composition, a quality which seems in

keeping with the fact that music was Eva Hoffman's first talent and inclination, before writing" (332). Arguably, the narrative can be seen as a highly structured record of a subject-in-transformation, which, nevertheless, allows for poetic breaks that are suggestive of the narrator's complex negotiations with herself and her mother (tongue).

Although it is evident that much has been lost during Eva's act of translation, the gains are unquestionable.<sup>5</sup> In writing her autobiography, Hoffman gives a unique and poignant account of a female subject, who like the Kristevan foreigner-translator, places an ear to the "still-warm cadaver of (her) maternal memory" and in her new language bears witness to something that is "Not involuntary, nor unconscious, but what is 'maternal,' because at the outer edge of words set to music and of unnamable urges, in the neighborhood of the senses and the biology..." ("Bulgaria, my Suffering" 169). *Lost in Translation*, in its constant reaching towards and pulling away from the possibility of articulation, (re)covers the music of language.

\*

Jurek Bogajewicz has described *Anna* (1987), his debut feature film, as his own, veiled, immigrant autobiography. But film critics point out Bogajewicz's consistent and serious preoccupation with female characters, as well as his rare sensitivity in representing women's issues on screen. In the case of *Anna*, Bogajewicz has received significant help in creating the narrative focused on women from his compatriot director,

---

<sup>5</sup> In "Des Tours de Babel," his elaboration on Walter Benjamin's theory of translation, Derrida deals with the economy of translation. His concept of "sur-vival" links the process of translation to that of life. Translation offers the original a continuation of life, but also a potential for better life (sur-life). It is simultaneously a reminder of loss and a promise of gain. Notably, Derrida's model of translation calls for "harmony" and the "accord of tongues" that would allow being to transgress meanings (202).

Agnieszka Holland (she co-scripted the story with Bogajewicz). The film is a portrait of a woman exiled from her country because of her “incorrect” political stance. It is also a critique of the Cold War ideological divisions between the East and West and an attempt to examine and problematize such divisions. From the very first shot, the viewer is asked to confront the central component of the cultural construct that supports American identity – the tale of refugees coming to the New World in search of economic and/or religious freedom. Bogajewicz and Holland (both Polish immigrants who landed in New York City in the 1980s) choose to explore the Eastern European strand of this tale.<sup>6</sup> Their film project is one of cultural re-translation; the authors, who found themselves in a diasporic environment that allows for a direct meeting of hostile cultural paradigms, wrestle with the Western myth of Eastern Europe and Eastern European myth of the West.

In a feat of postmodern textual practice, *Anna* opens with a cinematic anachronism: to a sound of a ringing telephone, the camera pans over the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century cityscape of downtown New York (with The World Trade Center looming over the rest of the district) and focuses on a human figure that seems to have just stepped off an *early* 20<sup>th</sup>-century immigrant boat from the Old World. The figure is a young woman enveloped in layers of dark, humble-looking skirts and kerchiefs, carrying antiquated bundles, and clutching a crumpled piece of paper with an address written on it. Despite being weighed down by her baggage, the woman proceeds on foot from the direction that suggests disembarking on Ellis Island. The viewer cannot help but feel sympathy for the

---

<sup>6</sup> Here I use the terms “Eastern European” and “Eastern Europe” to signal the cultural construct that is radically different from the one encompassed under the term East Central Europe as defined in my Introduction. The construct signaled refers to the Other of Western Europe, the part of Europe dominated, in the Anglo-American imagination, by Russia and later the Soviet regime.



lost soul, but at the same time one is made aware that the figure is a temporal impossibility. Immigrants no longer arrive at Ellis Island, and most of them do not look like characters from *Hester Street*. It takes a moment, but the viewer soon realizes that this is a representation of the common stereotype of an immigrant, a stereotype that echoes the turn-of-the-century mass migrations from Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup> The scene comments on the reductive but still very much alive portrait of Eastern Europeans' contribution to the American ethnic make up. This anachronistic image is then pushed into the background by another female presence on screen – a modern woman (circa 1987) captured by the camera as her day begins.

The sound of the ringing telephone takes us into a shabby but spacious New York City apartment, where we find a tall, long-legged blonde rushing naked around her bedroom, trying to get ready for a morning appointment, for which she is already running late. This is Anna (Sally Kirkland) – an attractive and sophisticated woman in her forties, whose looks suggest that she is one of many white-collar professionals living the busy city life. Within minutes, Anna, dressed in a stylish black outfit, stockings and high-heeled pumps, is standing at the curb and hailing a yellow cab. The only sign that betrays her immigrant identity can be found in Anna's voice; she has a slight foreign accent. The accent is hard to identify, but the narrative soon fills in the gap by showing Anna greet

---

<sup>7</sup> The years 1901-1910 were the peak decade of Eastern European immigration to the U.S. In 1907 alone, 633,905 people arrived in New York from that part of Europe. About 80% of these immigrants were people from rural areas, with low levels of literacy and without any industrial experience. These were so-called "economic" immigrants. After WWII, the communist regimes sealed the borders and discouraged international mobility. Periodically the governments of the Communist Block would pressure certain groups deemed "undesirable" (i.e. political activists or ethnic minority members, especially the Jews) to leave their respective homelands. These actions amounted to political purges and ethnic cleansing. Many of these immigrants ended up in the U.S. 1980's saw the biggest wave of "political" immigrants. Most of these immigrants were educated, highly literate, and with some knowledge of English. They managed to integrate faster into the American society than their predecessors, often pursuing professional careers (Grocholska).

her neighbors in fluent Czech. At the time when Anna enters the cab, the mysterious woman with bundles reaches the same street corner. She catches sight of Anna and beckons to her, but the cab is already speeding away.

The viewer later finds out, against initial impressions, that Anna Radková is an underemployed actress, living hand to mouth, making her way that morning to another unpromising, off-Broadway audition. She used to be a successful actress back in Czechoslovakia, but after the Prague Spring of 1968 she found herself a political alien in New York City, trying in vain to restart her career in a foreign country. The bundled up figure who is seeking contact with Anna turns out to be a provincial girl, Krystyna (Paulína Porízková), who has come from Anna's home country. She has been a faithful fan of Anna's art and wants to study with her favorite actress. She begs Anna to take her in and offers to clean Anna's place and wash her dishes in exchange. Seeing the devotion of her young admirer (not to mention a valise full of old newspaper clippings documenting the ex-star's rise to fame), Anna agrees to provide a home for Krystyna.

What happens next in the film is a bitter story of the opportunistic young woman appropriating the older woman's life. As Natasa Durovicova explains in her analysis of the U.S. reception of Bogajewicz's film,<sup>8</sup> *Anna* belongs to, and plays with, the rich Hollywood tradition of films built around the theme of backstage power struggles in the entertainment industry (e.g. *A Star Is Born*, *Fedora*, and *All About Eve*). Durovicova challenges the opinion of the Western critics who found *Anna* too predictable and argues

---

<sup>8</sup> The film *Anna* premiered in the U.S. in 1987 and was never distributed in East Central Europe. Durovicova's argument was first delivered at the conference on "Soviet and East European Directors Working in the West," which was held at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, in spring of 1989. At this point, my discussion is therefore largely circumscribed to the opinions and feelings that dominated the cultural debates of the 80's, especially those taking place in the immigrant circles. The post-1989 reception of *Anna* would be very different, both in America and in East Central Europe.

that the film's value rests in its intelligent reworking of the genre in question through the immigrant emplotment:

While the *frisson* of the standard version of this plot resides in the carefully controlled sadism of subordinating a well-known star performer to a newcomer's relative anonymity, as if the system ritually wished to purge itself of all traces of "transcendence" in favour of a popular aesthetic, *Anna* plays out this trajectory in a different register. Far from shedding the excess glamour accrued during years of top billing, à la Bette Davis in *All About Eve*, or Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*, the task of Sally Kirkland, in her first important role on screen, was first to build up the resonance of stardom, then cover it by twenty years of failure, and finally sum up the contradiction in the requisite self-destroying *tour de force*.

(118)

Durovicova furthers her argument by noting that Western critics had certain expectations with regard to Eastern European cinema; while a dialogue with Hollywood popular genres was welcomed in Western European cinema (e.g. French New Wave tributes to American noir or Italian Spaghetti Westerns), it was frowned upon when encountered in films from Eastern Europe. The films coming from behind the Iron Curtain (or directed by artists who came from behind the Iron Curtain) were generally expected to deliver the essence of reality as lived under Soviet domination: the reality filled with ruined lives of persecuted subjects. This customized demand was shaped by the bipolar system of power guiding political exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union, and it resisted any kind of mediating consciousness that would aim to destabilize the antagonistic division between the generative ideologies of the two

superpowers, which delineated each other as a political and public enemy. Immigrant narratives delivering stories of talented, well-educated, and successful individuals fleeing communism in order to find freedom in the democratic West but instead finding a professional and psychological ruin, due to maladjustments of life in a foreign language and a foreign culture, were common among Eastern Europeans; however, they faced resistance from the American audience because they documented historical occurrences that confronted the official value system of America, which continues to immortalize the ethos of endurance and eventual upward mobility. Furthermore, all narratives that spoke of a possibility of a relatively happy and fulfilling life under communism undermined the logic of the American political imaginary, which demonized communism as a uniformly brutal system in all socialist countries.

*Anna* is an impatient outcry against the enforced mappings of things Eastern European charted by the Western mind. This outcry is also directed against the paranoid Soviet formulations of the West as the fast-spreading system of political and moral bankruptcy, and on the other hand, against the idealizations of Western capitalism sung by some political dissidents.<sup>9</sup> My reception of the film (delayed by 18 years) has been inflected through the prism of my own immigrant status in the U.S. I see *Anna* as a cinematic text that contributes to and foretells the breakdown of the bipolar politics of otherness. In that sense, *Anna* is a film ahead of its time. Bogajewicz and Holland,

---

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Garton Ash captures this radical cultural schism in his heavily anecdotal essay on the situation of West vs. East Germany: “In Göttingen (West Germany), university students who had lived all their lives in a stable liberal democracy questioned and doubted the primacy of its traditional values – representative government, the rule of law, individual freedom – when faced with economic recession, the north-south divide, and the threat of nuclear war. In Gdańsk, young workers who had lived all their lives under Communism were daubing on a crane in the Lenin Shipyard the words “Man is born and lives free.” Polish *schoolchildren* chose as the motto of their *samizdat* journal ‘Dangerous freedom is dearer to me than safe bondage.’ In West Germany, Reagan was compared with a Nazi mass murderer. For most Poles, he was a hero” (97).

utilizing their liminal site of articulation, deploy complex discursive strategies in order to contribute to the cultivation of “multilingualism, polyglossia, the arts of cultural mediation, deep intercultural understanding and genuinely global consciousness” that Mary Louise Pratt posed in 1995 as the aspiration of a truly comparative and challenging intellectual framing of world relations, in aesthetics and politics (62). In the character of Anna, the viewer finds an intriguing hybrid identity (fittingly she is an actor skilled in switching masks) that resists the amelioration of her otherness as an immigrant from Eastern Europe, as a foreigner who looks like a Westerner but is not one. Simultaneously, she negates the semiotic code that would push her into the position of a negative presence (absence, really) that such resistance entails. Throughout the film, we see Anna fighting to preserve her individualism – on the one hand by avoiding ostracism from the new society as its alien other and, on the other hand, by escaping the leveling effect of the assimilation process.

The hybrid identity of Anna, her difference, is achieved, among other things, by the casting choice. Bogajewicz decided to use an American actress to play the role of a Czech immigrant. Sally Kirkland, known for having mastered the Stanislavski Method, accomplishes her mission with an uncanny authenticity. Anna certainly looks like a Westerner, is played by one, but still remains somehow displaced in her new homeland. Her displacement stands in contrast to Krystyna’s fast adaptation. Under Anna’s tender care, Krystyna quickly learns English, gets her teeth fixed (after she hears from an American agent that she has awful teeth and thus must be Eastern European, because “they all have rotten teeth”), and makes up a life story that will get her the sympathy and

attention of the American media. Actually, she steals Anna's biography in order to cover up her own dearth of private and political experiences.

When Anna arrived in the U.S. (sometime in the early 1970s), she had a "perfect" political past to capture the interest of the American public and possibly capitalize on this attention. In fact, her story is so tragic and so heartbreaking in its neat series of crimes committed by the communist authorities against her person and her private life that it is hard to take it at its face value. Anna had served a few years' sentence in a Czechoslovak prison for publicly assaulting the son of a Russian ambassador. As she later explains to Krystyna, she threw an ashtray at the man because, at some party, he pronounced the Czechs done for by the Soviets. While in prison, she gave birth to a daughter, who soon died as a result of improper immunization. In the meantime, her husband Tonda (a famous Czech director) had gone into exile in America. Eventually the government gave Anna an ultimatum: they would grant her freedom and an American visa if she agreed to never come back to her motherland. She accepted these terms, hoping to reunite finally with her beloved husband. Unfortunately, when this happened, her husband was no longer interested in a relationship with Anna. In America, he more or less sold his talent and aspirations to make commercials for MTV. In Anna's words, he became "more American than all the Americans," and Anna was, to him, a painful reminder of his artistic compromise.

On the surface, Anna's story is one of a martyr, a woman who jeopardized her marriage, career, and family in order to defend her nation's honor in front of a bunch of drunken people. In that respect the Western film critics were right to point out the banality of Anna's pre-immigration story. It is not that it could not have happened; it is

that the story, through its treatment in the film, became an annoying marker for the predictability of the audience's expectations. Bogajewicz and Holland served up a cliché; this cliché, however, earns a meaning once we inspect its entire trajectory. Initially, Anna's biography, as the cause of her fall, was a fetish demanded by the American media. She refused to circulate it; as an excellent actress, she did not want to be typecast as an Eastern European victim forever. Anna's story was then lifted by Krystyna, a non-actress and non-person (throughout the film she remains a fabrication of someone else's dreams), and used (along with Krystyna's exoticized Slavic features) to propel an ethically dubious but profitable acting/modeling stint. Anna never compromises her political stance, but she prohibits it from further dominating her identity. Anna's silence about her Czechoslovak past, unlike Tonda's (whose exile was a career choice and not a result of political banishment), does not contain shame, and it carries a different value. She disallows what could become an extremely advantageous publicity produced around her persona, because the persona of an Eastern European political refugee is still a subcategory of Soviet politics, despite all the celebrity bestowed upon this cultural entity by the enemies of the Soviet Union.

The moment of Anna's arrival in the United States is never depicted in the film; the viewer learns about it from Anna's narration to Krystyna. Anna describes how, once she had landed on American soil, she was surrounded by curious Western media, who prodded her for tales of communist oppression. One might imagine that the scene of her deliverance from the Evil Empire is the same scene that Paul Mazursky parodies in *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984), where a Russian circus musician defects at Macy's department store and is immediately seized by a group of American reporters, who insert

the incident in the very center of the Cold War political discourse. Whether he wants it or not, and in fact he is quite clueless about the political ramifications of his decision, the Russian's defection to the United States becomes an emblem of the Soviet violations of civil rights and, on the other hand, the American mission to liberate those who come to its shores from the clutches of communism. Only in Anna's case, she sabotages the American media's project by refusing to participate in the political circus they are so eager to create: she withholds her incarceration story and rejects the only social recognition that the media can afford – the recognition of Anna as another victim of communism.

Bogajewicz and Holland use a female immigrant character to deconstruct the popular Cold War discourse of Eastern European identity built around the heavily celebrated autobiographies of male dissident artists and intellectuals (e.g., Czeslaw Milosz, Milan Kundera, Danilo Kiš) who defected to the West, after more or less heroic attempts to subvert the communist regimes through oppositional politics in their home countries, and who achieved a decent amount of fame and success abroad because of the ideological choices that made it possible for the Western public to embrace them as “rescued” from the perils of communism.

The position of a female exile vis-à-vis the figure of a male political dissident has always been subordinate, if not relegated to the sphere of obscurity. Magdalena Zaborowska describes this multilayered marginalization as follows:

Being an alien woman from the communist East, she also represents a different cultural concept of femininity and sexual conduct, both of which obtain political meaning in the capitalist West. Her way of dressing, her accent, her marital status,



the kind of work she can do, all become additional factors to be tested against stereotypical images of females from East Europe. As a woman, she is also marginalized further as the “other” type of an émigré, one who does not fit the dominant heroic model of a male dissident hero from the Other Europe. (173)

The process of othering described here by Zaborowska is resonant of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s theory of the subaltern, and specifically the precarious situation of women within the subaltern classes. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak discusses the position of the marginalized female members of Indian society who are excluded from the existing orders of representation, which span from the discourse of foreign neo-colonialism to the indigenous rhetoric of nation-building: “[...] both as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (287). Theorizing East Central Europe as a (post)colonial territory, one can see the entrapment, similar to the one described by Spivak, of the East Central European woman, especially the one, like Anna, who finds herself in an interstitial cultural position, facing the competing (male-oriented) discourses of capitalism, communism, and oppositional politics/nationalism.<sup>10</sup>

While, arguably, capitalism demonizes the woman, communism colonizes her by invading her privacy, and nationalism uses the female to bolster its patriarchal rhetoric. In

---

<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, after the dismantling of communism and reclaiming their national identities, East Central European countries continue to ignore, or in worse cases to suppress, women’s rights movement. Poland’s Solidarity unionists have campaigned against the communist legalization of abortion (in place since 1956) in a gesture of submission to the Vatican policy on the issue. Consequently, when Solidarity became the ruling party in the early 1990s, abortion was banned. Since then the Democratic Left Alliance (the post-communist party) and the Polish feminist groups have fought a losing battle for the pro-choice legislation. Today, Poland remains one of the staunchest defenders of criminalizing abortion in the European Union.

her analysis of gender dynamics in the Soviet satellite states, Anikó Imre argues that the communist domination and ensuing post-communist crisis “register in the sexual identity of East Central European men as a form of emasculation” (7). The men in question are members of the anti-communist opposition, dissident writers, and pro-democratic politicians. This emasculation, Imre explains, is in turn compensated for by inflicting violence upon the “internal colonized” of the male subject: the East Central European woman. In *Anna* this kind of power play is exposed in the relationship of Anna with Tonda and visualized in the scene of the party at Tonda’s apartment. In it, we watch the complete humiliation of Anna: Tonda, who is now running with the hip crowd of New York City, refuses Anna’s entry to his party. He does not want her presence among his new circle of friends because Anna has been a witness to his emasculation – his leaving Czechoslovakia after the failure of spring 1968, and his plunge from being a politically driven film director to making commercials for MTV. The only way for Tonda to have rectified his emasculation under the communist system would have been to serve a prison term for subversive political action. But that fate now belongs to Anna.

Against Spivak’s pessimistic model of the silenced subaltern woman, Bogajewicz’s film offers, if only momentarily, an interventionist possibility for the East Central European immigrant woman. Through the use of silence itself, the character of Anna dislocates the dominant reading of her narrative. Not by being silenced, but by choosing to be silent, Anna denies the representation of her life within the parameters of the dominant ideology. Her “heroic” act against the Russian ambassador’s son is not a result of Anna’s oppositional politics; rather, it is a comically exaggerated gesture (like that of throwing down the gauntlet) acted out by a star performer in an impulse of civic

pride. Still, that performance is enough to send Anna to jail and initiate a series of quite tragic consequences, including the enforced exile. Regardless of Anna's true involvement (or lack thereof) in the fight against communism, when in exile, she finds herself being pushed into performing the role of a dissident. The process of over-signification that Anna's actions undergo both in Czechoslovakia and the United States illustrates the limits to which one can tell one's own story, speaking from the space located in-between the two empires firmly locked in a match of mutual reinforcement. Anna's decision to remain silent and not enter the discursive battleground of the bipolar system of power is the only gesture of self-making that she can afford at the time. Bogajewicz and Holland, via the character of Anna, draw our attention to the fact that silence can sometimes be a viable political strategy: Anna's choice to remain silent about her "heroic" act of resistance carries as much impact in terms of constructing a social identity as did the choice of many émigré dissidents to remain silent about their personal contributions to installing communism in their countries in the first place.

The trajectory of Anna's story is further inflected, on the extra-textual level, by the biography of the actress Paulína Porízková, who was cast in the role of Krystyna. As Durovicova explains, Porízková came to the West with a "flamboyantly melodramatic" past. Her parents fled Czechoslovakia, leaving their daughter behind. Later, after multiple failed attempts to reunite with their child, Porízková's desperate parents, with the help of Swedish journalists, tried to kidnap her in a rented plane. This attempt was thwarted by the Czechoslovak police, who then imprisoned the mother for a number of years. Eventually, under pressure from the international public, the authorities allowed the whole family to leave Czechoslovakia (121). The fact that the film calls for Porízková to

relinquish her true biography and appear as someone who parasitically takes over someone else's political past only amplifies Bogajewicz and Holland's critical appraisal of the enforced cultural exchanges during the Cold War. By having an American actress play the role of a Czech dissident, and on the other hand, by making a Czech dissident play a politically ignorant opportunist who quickly makes herself at home in America, the filmmakers engage in deconstructing the ideological orthodoxies that shaped the relations between the American and Soviet empires. The reversal of roles produced by the casting choices brings about a realization of cultural *contamination* most feared by the two Cold War enemies.

The meta-commentary expressed in those casting choices is a continuation of the concerns that lie at the heart of the film. Casting as such is one of the main themes in *Anna*. The audition scene at the beginning of the narrative represents, in summary form, the tragedy of Anna's fate as an immigrant. Securing a role in an American production is a metaphor for Anna's attempt at belonging in her new country of residence. During the audition, instead of reading the parts from the play, the actresses are asked to act out the "most sexual experiences" of their lives. One by one, they get up on stage and partake in the exhibitionist exercise. The actresses have no qualms sharing tales of tawdry erotic encounters, including a seventy-year old woman talking about her vibrators. When Anna's turn comes, she remains silent. She then explains that she would rather not talk about her personal life but act out the material provided by the play. She summons her twenty years of professional experience and the ability to "do Shakespeare" as mitigating circumstances.

Anna is maladapted in the country where one might easily sell her privacy in order to be successful. How does one make a transition from the system where privacy is a desired privilege to a system where it is peddled as commodity? She cherishes her privacy as a facet of her newly gained civic freedom. The ease with which the other actresses divulge the details of their sex lives puzzles Anna. Not ready to make a moral compromise, she only gets to be the understudy (for all eight actresses) in the play. In the position of an understudy, Anna is forced to be a passive participant in what is happening on stage. She spends her evenings waiting backstage and rehearsing the lines that she will never be able to perform. The task of the understudy encapsulates Anna's immigrant status: she leads a marginal existence, awaiting her chance at fully participating in life. She observes the life of Americans from an outsider's perspective, which might be extremely insightful but hardly rewarding, as is the backstage vantage point of an understudy, who sees all the tricks that make a play but is rarely a participant in the magic of theatre -- the social pact between the audience and the actors. Anna's status in the theatre could also be read as a metaphor for the geopolitical position of East Central Europe during the Cold War period: the spectral presence in the theatre of History but not on its stage.

One can assume that, like all other aspects of her existence in Czechoslovakia, Anna's "most sexual experience" was, to a greater or lesser degree, regulated by the communist power structures. In *Cinema of the Other Europe*, Dina Iordanova analyzes the tensions between the private and the political, the individual and the communal as expressed in the art of East Central Europe:

Totalitarianism took away the right to private life from the individual; everybody's personal life had to be political and politicized – as seen in films like *The Joke*, *Man of Marble*, *Angi Vera* and others. It was this suspension of the private in favour of an imposed communal interest that ordinary people in the region found particularly difficult to live with. However, whenever the official ideology tried to make the politicized concept of communal interest the substitute for concern over personal welfare, the response of narrative arts (cinema included) was to pay more attention to the individual. (91)

Anna's refusal to recreate, during the audition, a part of her intimate life that was corrupted by the dehumanizing regime is a protest of an individual against the priorities of the communist state, as well as the priorities of the capitalist job market. At this point Bogajewicz and Holland link communism's confiscation of one's privacy with capitalism's prostitution of one's privacy: while the communist system requires (often brutally enforces) the total sacrifice of one's private life for the sake of the utopian collective interests, capitalism ropes the individual into forfeiting one's right to privacy by promising a material utopia, which loses its allure once the expenditure of one's time, effort, and integrity is taken into account.

Like many characters in the works of the artists from East Central Europe, Anna represents the value of ethically noble individualism, devoted to the pursuit of dignity and truth as a way of subverting the ills of socio-political systems. Timothy Garton Ash describes this idealistic position in the following words:

[...] the conviction that moral changes can have a seemingly disproportionate political effect, that consciousness ultimately determines being, and that

the key to the future lies not in the external, objective condition of states— political, military, economic, technological—but in the internal, subjective condition of individuals. This is where Central Europe confronts Eastern Europe: in the autonomous sphere of culture, in the kingdom of the spirit. (193)

Significantly, Anna's individualism does not dovetail with the utilitarian individualism, which is one of the building blocks of Anglo-American subjectivity. Rather, marked by emotional tumult and a large dose of idealism, Anna's disposition reminds one of a romantic heroine.<sup>11</sup> Her individualism, sometimes arrogant, sometimes irresponsible, but always uncompromising, is an ethos well established in the cultural discourse of many East Central European countries whose colonized people found themselves historically trapped between two conflicting interests: the conformist drive to withstand the aggressor's hostile politics in the name of minimal safety guaranteed for the group (the survivalist stance) and the oppositional drive to remain faithful to the nationalist cause through acts of individual resistance (the heroic stance). Although clearly alluding to the tradition of what Czesław Miłosz called the "nonerotic heroine – a wife, a commander" (214), Anna's character in the film functions as an awkward signifier rather than a complete and consistent sign of this romantic attitude. Once again, Bogajewicz and Holland signal a historically induced gap between an easily recognizable image -- a prop retrieved from the storeroom of cultural imagination, and the exhausted ideal behind it. This rhetorical move is undertaken in order to warn against using convenient tropes of

---

<sup>11</sup> Anna's literary prototype can be found among the early works of Polish Romanticism, in Adam Mickiewicz's *Grażyna* (1823). The female protagonist of this novel in verse defies her husband's will in order to prevent his collaboration with the enemy. As a result, she sacrifices her own life in an attempt to defend her husband's honor and her country's sovereignty.

historiography to address transient history.<sup>12</sup> Central Europe might well confront Eastern Europe on the spiritual plane, but in doing so it should steer clear of any notions of special cultural superiority. Nineteenth-century Romantic Messianism might have served a useful function in consolidating regional identity of that part of Europe in the face of German, Austrian and Russian colonization, but the rise of Nazi Germany (or the Soviet usurpation of international communist leadership) demonstrated the dangers of one group's assumption of its moral entitlement.

Anna's spiritual depth stands in opposition to Krystyna's resourceful malleability. The "lightness of being" exemplified by Krystyna makes Anna's struggle with the history that haunts her all the more poignant. But Krystyna's character is by no means a simple one, especially when viewed in the company of similar characters brought to screen by Agnieszka Holland, the director and scriptwriter whose numerous films contemplate the issues surrounding identity reconstruction, with special emphasis placed on the ethical conundrums that arise in cases of assumed identity (*Europa, Europa*, 1990; *Olivier, Olivier*, 1992). Holland's career as a film director began with two pictures that self-consciously explored the link between professional playacting and the exercise of personal mimicry constitutive of human subjectivity (*Screen Tests*, 1977; *Provincial Actors*, 1979).

Although Krystyna lived in communist Czechoslovakia, her life was not traumatized by the forces of the regime. Like millions of other people living in the Soviet

---

<sup>12</sup> Here Bogajewicz and Holland offer their contribution to a long-standing debate in Polish cinema about romantic heroism as the key element of national mythology. In *Polish National Cinema*, Marek Haltof analyzes the beginnings of that debate among the post-WWII filmmakers, members of the so called Polish School. His account of the debate focuses on Andrzej Wajda's critical espousal of the romantic tradition vis-à-vis Andrzej Munk's outright caricature of the ideal responsible for the pompously martyrological streak in Polish national identity (71-109).



sphere of political influence, Krystyna led a peaceful, if non-eventful, existence in some provincial town, safely distanced from sites where communist agents exercised violence and terror. When Anna pulls out a few photos documenting the Prague Spring, Krystyna displays some curiosity, but at the same time it is clear that the events in Prague were not Krystyna's battle. In her own words, "Czechoslovakia was the most boring country in the world. All I ever did was go to school, take piano lessons, and milk the cows." She is a provincial girl, who would have continued milking the cows if the communist social equity reforms did not give her an opportunity to get some education (including piano lessons).

Krystyna comes to the U.S. in search of excitement, not because life under Communism was unbearable. She quickly recognizes, however, that in order to be somebody, to gain a visible identity, she needs to acquire a proper Eastern European biography. In contrast to Anna, who tries to constitute herself in the U.S. by renouncing her previous, historically constructed self, Krystyna sees her opportunity in embracing the social text assigned by the Cold War ideology to subjects coming from Eastern Europe. In that sense she is a better actress than Anna: she performs, in real time and space, a life that she never had to the applause of accepting American audience.

The climax of Bogajewicz's film plays out in two self-referential scenes that comment on the role of representation in the process of identity construction. In the first scene, Anna witnesses Krystyna's television appearance, during which the younger woman retells Anna's life story, along with its most intimate and painful details, as her own tragic biography. Along with a horrified Anna, we watch Krystyna slip into the role of a political refugee from Eastern Europe and garner the sympathy of her American

interviewer. At this moment, Anna sees Krystyna perform “Anna” in order to become “Krystyna.” As Krystyna fabricates her own consciousness on screen (with the help of Anna’s words), Anna starts experiencing an emptying out. Although she refused to enter her Czechoslovakian narrative into the public discourse of American media, she realizes that after Krystyna has done it in her stead, she, Anna, loses her footing in reality.

The rest of the film is, in fact, a study of Anna’s unraveling self. The lesson that Bogajewicz and Holland teach is about the organic connection that exists between the East Central European consciousness and the dictate of history, the latter perceived as a result of historical accident rather than historical purpose. The dictate of history, unlike Jamesonian Necessity: “the inexorable *form* of events” and an “absent cause” (102), has the feeling of absurd aimlessness. Jameson claims that “History can be apprehended only through its effects, and never as some reified force” (102), but in East Central Europe, for so long, history lost its cause and effect and became a palpable, often dismal, vortex impossible to resist or ignore. Although Anna will not easily reconcile herself to the flow of history and especially to the manipulations of historiography (a contribution to the Cold War production of knowledge), there is never any doubt as to history’s power of raising her consciousness in the first place, even if it occurred within an adversarial framework. Paradoxically, when Anna is robbed of her individual, however nullifying, historical experience, her consciousness (the sense of self vis-à-vis the collective) deteriorates. Here, the lack of history is what hurts: Anna is finally outside of her history, and she wins her right to unobstructed and private life, but the “lightness of being” that she now faces is not a liberation but privation. Like other immigrants to the United States, Anna finds herself at the frightening point where the old history no longer matters,

but the new history seems to be elusive and always already someone else's mediated story.

The camera work documents the birth of one identity and death of another through a series of elaborate face shots. The series opens with a compensatory close-up of Krystyna's "straight" face as she is publicly lying about her past during the interview, but at the same time gaining visibility. That image is then followed by a split shot that fuses the two women's faces into one. The image appears in Anna's dream and presumably expresses Anna's anxiety over Krystyna's theft of her identity. The dual face is then replaced by the third face shot in the series: this time it is a "disappearing" close-up of Anna's face.

That close-up is the dramatic center of the second meta-cinematic scene in Bogajewicz's film, where we watch Anna enter a small movie theatre (presumably one of the New York City's art film venues) and watch one of her old Czechoslovakian films. Apart from Anna, there are only a few people in the audience – among them Anna's ex-husband Tonda, who directed the film, and a couple using the theatre as a make-out spot. Unaware of each other's presence in the theatre, both Tonda and Anna are quietly enjoying viewing their collaborative project which, we might assume, reminds them of the successful artistic endeavor they once shared. But this moment of nostalgia is suddenly interrupted by a bizarre incident that underscores Anna's growing insecurity about her place in life. The celluloid skin of the film gets caught in the projector, and we see a close-up of Anna's youthful face burn and melt away, time and again, with each eroding exposure reiterating Anna's failure to restart her acting career in the U.S. and her current state of devastation caused by the loss of her private history. The scene invites

and simultaneously delivers an analytical commentary on the spectator's potential identification with Anna.

In my case, the scene brought to the visual surface my own relationship to Anna, and this visualization was immediately flooded by anxiety, surely stemming from the *mise-en-abîme* structuring of the scene: I saw Anna sitting in my position of passive audience to someone else's on-screen destruction. But once sutured into Anna's position as a spectator, I soon realized that I was witnessing the destruction of my self. The burning face for Anna-the-spectator was both recognizable and foreign: an image that easily aligned with her physical features but also an image of a phantom from the past. Similarly, throughout the film, Anna is for me a recognizable figure and a phantom that I wish I did not have a way to recognize. My ongoing identification with Anna, an East Central European immigrant in New York trying to reinvent herself as a female and a professional, became all the more poignant at this moment of identification crisis, so well depicted here by means of cinema. The burning close-up of Anna's youthful face is most readable if we conceptualize it as a *reversal* of the mirror encounter with the self from Lacan's mirror stage theory. This reversal might be a necessary step in an immigrant identity reinvention.

As I watch Anna's face burn, I experience an emotion that is a mixture of sorrow and relief, a feeling that I believe I share with Anna-the-spectator. Through her, I am participating in the undoing of the used-up image of my self which is far removed from the jumble of conflicted alliances which now constitute my subjectivity. If, according to Lacan, the external mirror image provides the coherence that the subject in itself lacks as it enters the Symbolic, then a slow, visually mediated destruction of this image has to

thrust the subject back into the Imaginary, while liberating it for a potential reconstruction of the self. Through the eyes of Anna-the-spectator, I enjoy the visceral liberation that the burning of her/my effigy brings about. While this particular scene offers an occasion for leaving the Symbolic order that proved inadequate in the new immigrant situation, the film as a whole provides me with a new mirror image, a new entry into the Symbolic that has a potential to consolidate my new self.

This mirror image of my current self is a composite of Anna and Krystyna. I come to that realization as I catch a clear glimpse of my own duality in that brief split shot of the two women's faces seamlessly merged on screen into one distressing, yet enthralling image. The asymmetrical face looking back at me not only bears witness to the lesion marking my self ever since leaving Poland, but it also puts it together, heals it into a tolerable scar, puts it aside, so I can finally rest. Kristeva calls it the face of a foreigner: "the face that is so *other* bears the mark of a crossed threshold that irremediably imprints itself as peacefulness or anxiety. ...Vivid concern or delight, set there in these other features, without forgetfulness, without ostentation, like a standing invitation to some inaccessible journey, whose code the foreigner does not have but whose mute, physical, visible memory he keeps" (266). My adult face has become the face of a foreigner, split between nostalgic Anna and malleable Krystyna, between my past in Poland and present in the U.S., between the love for my American husband and the hatred I sometimes feel towards his nation, always observing my mother's Russian Orthodox ritual and undergoing the Catholic sacraments by way of my father, following two different calendars, torn between loyalty to the East and attraction for the West. As the list of these

formative divisions continues, and I go back in time, I wonder: Have I always been a foreigner? Is every East Central European somehow always already a foreigner?

Ultimately the film tells us how our history legitimizes us and not others; to have history is to have a legitimate existence, even if that history brings humiliation and pain. More specifically, the film reflects on the persistence of the effects of volatile history in the identity makeup of East Central Europeans. Before Krystyna's appropriation of Anna's past, Anna used to believe that she could cancel her share of history, and thus distance herself from the detestable Cold War ideology in order to find a more autonomous way of validating her existence. She hoped that acting would provide this validation as a discourse committed to the realm of aesthetics. Conceptually, acting should serve as a fine replacement for history, since, as Hayden White noted, history is "a branch of the art of rhetoric" and, just like acting, it involves a fair dosage of imaginative interpretation (120). But acting, like history, is a discourse that depends on social recognition, and the business of acting, as Anna discovered during her American auditions, is infiltrated by a given political hegemony, which privileges certain sites of enunciation and invalidates others. Here, Anna finds out, her transparent, realistic acting has long fallen out of favor. At the time, at least according to Bogajewicz and Holland's perception (biased as it might have been because of their foreign perspective, but also somewhat informed by the two directors' hands-on participation in staging and directing in American theatres), New York City audiences were fed a repertoire of scandalizing abstractions that went under the broad heading of the avant-garde theater. The play that Anna auditions for at the start of the film features actors spilling repetitive, affected lines, using outlandish props (e.g. birds attached to actors heads) and gratuitous nudity.

Not surprisingly, Anna, who had been accustomed to art allegorizing history, is turned off by this theater's vague relationship to life (life as she has known it). In her American exile, Anna still, unwittingly, expects history (and art) to provide her with a *raison d'être* through sheer immediacy and violent insertion of the quotidian into a grand political scheme. It is a syndrome shared by the colonized people, and most East Central Europeans who survived Communism have suffered from it, too. The situation where history choreographed by external agents of power trivializes the meaning of daily existence and abruptly annuls the individual's decisions about his or her private life creates the subject who imbues history with metaphysical quality. History as an impenetrable, top-down source of authority allows for the subject to accept hostile incursions into his or her life as less dreadful than they would otherwise be perceived. It also permits the subject to feel a certain amount of hubris: History is made with the subject's ritualistic contribution, often a painful sacrifice. But history relegated to the realm of metaphysics is a double-edged sword – it breeds inertia and inability of the subject to recognize the potential for historical change that rests in the hands of an individual. When given a chance, Anna is unable to emancipate herself from historical metaphysics. She would need to turn her hubris into a sense of humor, were she to prosper as an actress in off-Broadway pompous romps.

The character of Krystyna, on the other hand, initially somewhat outside of history, demonstrates how acting according to the parameters of recognizable socio-political code can inscribe one into history, not to mention endow one with a successful acting career. Anna, the idealist, fails at remaking herself on her own terms because she ignores American society's expectations as to her artistic and social performances.

Her irreverence towards the social contract culminates in the scene when Anna, the understudy, is finally asked to appear onstage as a replacement for an absent actress. That evening Anna arrives at the theatre distraught and crying. She has just been subjected to Krystyna's televised betrayal. It is on that very night that she gets her big chance of impressing the American audience. She is to play a twenty-year old Black woman. Instead, Anna stumbles onto the stage and directly addresses the audience in an emotional outburst of pleas mixed with invectives. She derides the play, the actors, and the members of the audience. Needless to say, she is booed off the stage and forcefully removed from the theatre.

Anna's confrontation with American audience is another instance of her misguided communication with people around her. In her effort to be true to herself, Anna overlooks the role that the other (society) has in one's identity construction, regardless whether the stage of this construction is theatre or history. By refusing to act according to stage directions, and instead delivering a personal expression of disappointment, Anna violates theatre conventions which bar an actor from performing outside of the play's script. If we continue reading Anna's place in the theatre metaphorically – as East Central Europe's situation during the Cold War, then Anna's alienated but violently audible voice projected from the stage to an audience not prepared to hear it is the illustration of the Soviet satellites' persistent attempts to go off course and break out of the limiting cycle of history.

The characters of Eva and Anna are two East Central European women caught up in measuring their identities against the Western conventions that dictate the possibilities of leading fulfilling lives in exile. While Eva appropriates all of the social conventions of



the host culture, Anna fights against them. Eva gains recognition through her writing but forsakes her eroticism and musical talent. Anna exposes herself to a breakdown in her determination to preserve her creativity. Neither woman starts a family. Both characters are Cold War refugees and thus have to navigate between the two hostile ideologies that shaped their milieu. Their parallel but different stories provide space for reflection on what it is to be an East Central European and a woman. Most importantly, their stories break through the wall of stereotypes about Eastern European women and offer subtle, yet extremely complicated representations of a marginal European identity, which I use, not unlike Krystyna who used Anna's life story, to write myself into existence in the new language.

## Chapter 2

### Bruno Schulz and the Evanescent Historical Moment

“Between the darkness of myth and the sharp contour of actual history: between the reefs of Scylla and Charybdis the poet had to guide his ship.”

-- Bruno Schulz, *“Tragic Freedom”*

\*

The difference between memory and remembrance rests on the degree of volition involved in the act of memorizing, as well as, on the amount of continuity invested in the act of remembering. Memory is closer and more immediate to the event that has happened, and remembrance is about our representation of that event. Memory is an imprint of reality on the mind. Remembrance is what we do with the imprint, how we order it and catalogue it. Memory inhabits the moment; remembrance requires the passage of time. Bruno Schulz’s fiction engages both memory and remembrance. The simultaneous approach of the illuminating moment and a tug away from it, in the direction of a more cohesive story, make his fiction magically real. The imitative impulse of traditional mimesis is continuously checked by a disruptive emanation of a force that is yet to be assimilated.

Schulz (1892-1942) employed the style of what is now known as magic realism because this stylistic mode best corresponds to his complex socio-economic and cultural milieu. The style of magic realism helps this artist to alter the ideological perspective from which he was forced to create. Schulz uses magic realism to preserve the tension

between the literary and the historical, and thus dismisses the charges of having withdrawn into the realm of the unbelievable solely as means of escape from the turbulent history of his native region, of having fled into the glossy world of nostalgia that Fredric Jameson finds so hazardous in both modernism and postmodernism. Through magic realism, Schulz illustrates his community's blend of the mundane with the arcane, history with indigenous chronicle.

From the outset, it is important to stress that the latest studies in magic realism show that the term's genealogy leads us beyond Latin America of 1940s and 50s, back to post-WWI Europe. In 1925, Franz Roh, the German art historian coined the term *Magischer Realismus* to characterize the post-Expressionist direction in European painting that took artists away from Expressionism and abstract art back to Realism. There is evidence that shows that the term and the aesthetic of magic realism were then popularized among the members of literary circles.<sup>13</sup> After the traumas of World War I, in times of great political and economic instability, many abstract avant-garde artists felt a need to return to representational art – an art of precision and objectivity.<sup>14</sup> However, the realism that those artists adopted was different from nineteenth-century Realism. In the words of Franz Roh, magic realism (also referred to as New Objectivity) was to capture “[t]he clash of true reality and the apparent reality” (20). Roh believed that “[h]umanity seems destined to oscillate forever between devotion to the world of dreams

---

<sup>13</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, the editor and organizer for the magazine *900*, which was published in both Italian and French, popularized the term *realismo magico* in 1927 among European poets and writers.

<sup>14</sup> Irene Guenther who writes about magic realism in the Weimer Republic describes the pro-realist turn in the interwar period as follows:

In was an art that was firm in compositional structure and was, once again, representational. In reaction to Expressionism's apocalyptic visions, heated color palette, utopian message, and the shattering disillusionment which followed the war, this post-Expressionist art concerned itself with the tangible real, the familiar. After the emotional fervor of Expressionism, as well as the horrors of the war and subsequent German Revolution, artists searched for “soberness” and “freedom from all sentimentality.” (37)

and adherence to the world of reality” (17). Consequently, he found in magic realism a way to recuperate the objective world obliterated by Expressionists and other modernists in order to juxtapose it with its compulsive imitation, or impression, delivered by the human mind. This new kind of realism represented the “energetic intensity” of things (20); however, Roh emphasized, this elucidating crystallization of things always proclaimed it was “produced artificially” (20), wrestled from “the midst of general becoming, of universal dissolution” (22). In order to extend this dialectic to the subject of memory and remembrance in Schulz’s work, we might say that magic realism abets the narrator in the effort to remember a memory, while preserving its inherent fragility, and pointing out the “miracle of an apparent persistence and duration in the midst of a demoniacal flux” (Roh 22).

This “demoniacal flux” is the flux of history. The history of twentieth-century East Central Europe has been demoniacal and at times only impish, but regardless of the exact proportion of the involvement of what seemed at the time as the non-human, otherworldly forces, this history has outgrown its own understanding among those who were most affected by it. My favorite anecdote that illustrates this severance of people from their own history is this: the Polish Communist Party authorities ordered the city services to paint the dormant lawns green in the middle of winter in preparation for the arrival of a top communist official from Moscow. The city in this anecdote is sometimes identified as Warsaw, sometimes as Katowice, the official as Brezhnev or Khrushchev. When we retell this farce, usually to give foreigners a taste of life under communism, it is irrelevant who the players were or where it was staged. It does not even matter if this event has really taken place. What matters is the fact that it could have happened in

communist Poland, that the unbelievable and absurd act of painting the brown winter landscape green was a possible aspect of that reality. Even if one does not believe in this particular story, who will argue about the absurd history of those days of permanent shortage of everything – the days spent waiting on line, not knowing whether one would be lucky enough to walk away with yet another hairdryer or maybe a whole couch for the apartment that one paid for but would not receive until decades later. What makes magic realism what it is – a fusion of the real and the fantastic, of the historical and the unbelievable – can be found in abundance throughout the modern Polish history, and throughout the history of the entire region of East Central Europe.

Arguably, we may discuss the history of this region in terms of colonialism. In *The Price of Freedom*, Piotr Wandycz carefully reviews the theories of socio-economic and political history of East Central Europe and problematizes the concept of colonial periphery with regard to this part of Europe. Nevertheless, he concludes that Poland, along with Bohemia and Hungary, may be viewed as peripheral territory to the European core, the core that for many centuries has been located on the strip of land that stretches from northern Italy, through northern and southeastern France, the Netherlands, and western Germany, to southern England. Interestingly, Wandycz inquires whether the socio-economic model that divides Europe into center, periphery and semi-periphery could be useful for studying the culture of Europe, and especially the cultural achievements of East Central Europe. He asks, “Did most of the great cultural currents and movements in Europe originate in the core? Has East Central Europe been mainly an adapter and developer rather than an initiator? (4-5) My answer to these questions follows the work of those cultural and literary critics who have recently provided

excellent studies of the Irish and Spanish peripheries, and by doing so allowed us to view the European center as implicated in a complex web of reciprocal dependencies with their next-door colonies.

Understandably, the nature of these dependencies is very different from the dependencies of the imperial core with the colonies set on other continents, but the importance of understanding the former relationships is equal to the importance of understanding the latter. The purpose of such studies should avoid comparing the taker's and the giver's contributions to the culture. Culture is not limited to cultural achievements. Significant cultural knowledge is to be found in the reasons for lack of achievements, or in the normative criteria for what counts as cultural achievement. The study of any one culture is pointless without the study of the subculture that functions as the difference for the negative-identification of the culture.

Will the center-periphery paradigm applied to East Central Europe perpetuate its peripheral status? I believe that an intelligent appropriation of this model, already employed by many artists from the region in question, can help to subvert the very real colonial dependence between Western Europe and its peripheries, or at least change the way we think about imperialism. Magic realism, with its smart and always mobile juxtaposition of center and periphery, offers a very attractive way to oppose the discourses of the center (e.g., European modernism or American post-modernism), and thus gain the space and voice for the periphery. Denying the widely-used and intelligible dichotomy of the powerful Western Europe and its underdeveloped Eastern periphery, which has shaped the world's imaginary Europe for quite some time now, will not help East Central Europe to gain identity outside of this controlling and compulsive, even if

imaginary, mold. What can be done is to enter the mold and attempt to alter its shape from within. Literature provides the arena for the colonial subject to claim its remembrance.

Despite the fact that Bruno Schulz has clearly defined the place of the poet to be on the cusp of myth and history, scholars continue to interpret Schulz's writing as a receptacle of private mythology, not history.<sup>15</sup> Numerous essays have been published in which his works are repeatedly read in terms of family folklore, child psychology, linguistics, and poetics.<sup>16</sup> Although this kind of critical effort has put Schulz firmly on the map of the European modernism, it also limits his work to the narrow dimensions of an intimate poetic memoir. In Schulz's case memoir always speaks to and on behalf of a certain collectivity. Here, collectivity consists of the multiethnic inhabitants of Galicia, an East Central European periphery that formed a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while trying to negotiate its place in the politically-, technologically- and economically-transformed world at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Recently, efforts have been made to read Schulz historically. One of these readings comes from Gillian Banner, who incorporates Schulz's writing into the body of Holocaust literature. Banner offers a controversial reading of the short stories as a "memory" of future history. She argues that Schulz's prose represents a memory of things to come – a prophecy of the cataclysm of the Holocaust. For her purposes, Banner focuses on the dynamics of prophecy – re-visioning the past in order to envision the

---

<sup>15</sup> The entirety of Schulz's surviving body of work consists of two collections of short stories (*The Street of Crocodiles*, 1934, and *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, 1937), a novella (*The Comet*, 1938), a collection of art (*The Book of Idolatory*, created in 1920-24, as well as a small number of other drawings, engravings and paintings), plus a few critical essays and letters to friends and intellectuals of his time.

<sup>16</sup> For a series of the most recent essays that reiterate this line of interpretation, see *Bruno Schulz: New Documents and Interpretations* edited by Czeslaw Z. Prokopczyk. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.

future – as enacted by Schulz’s narrator. Although I find Banner’s explication refreshing in its emphasis on the universal that can be derived from the particularity of Schulz’s fiction, I believe that, at moments, Banner falls into the trap of mythologizing for the sake of the remembrance of a singular, albeit dire, event of history. This impulse is easy to explain in the times when the remembrance of the Holocaust needs reinforcement. However, in the process of strengthening remembrance of the Holocaust, Banner sacrifices the present that Schulz’s narrator tries to communicate.

Gillian Banner analyzes the representation of the flow of time in Schulz’s fictions in terms of nostalgia. Her claim is that Schulz is writing about what is already lost: the Jewish heritage, the *shtetl*, the presence of Jews in East Central Europe. Despite the fact that the stories were written years before the Holocaust, Banner interprets them as tales of a world aware of its looming annihilation, and thus these stories can be considered as a prophecy of the Holocaust.

Two features of Schulz’s creations serve as proof for Banner’s argument. First, there is Schulz’s obsession with the past; second, the mode of continuous disintegration that dominates most of the narratives. For Banner, Schulz’s narrator oscillates between crying for the bygone era of happiness and warning about the imminent destruction: his nostalgia is subverted by the inklings of the unraveling and threatening future. Banner states, “At some point in almost all of the stories his narrative leaves the realms of what-was, to enter the realms of what-might-be and the what-might-be is usually very odd, ashen, cracked, broken...” (42).

This apocalyptic frame leaves out the colorful vivacity and the emphasis on the transformative moment characteristic of Schulz’s prose. These qualities are the strongest



and most original aspects of Schulz's fiction. Jerzy Ficowski (a Polish poet who devoted much of his career to excavating and documenting Schulz's life) comments on Schulz's ability to capture the nature of change in the following words:

Nothing is final in Schulz's fiction; what has happened can always be "undone." Neither defeat nor victory is ultimate, and even death is problematic and uncertain. The general fluctuation of the laws of nature also gives rise to an anxiety and ambiguity about all things and an anticipation of realizing dreams, a creative joy. No creation reaches the limit of possibility; beyond each one lies another in an endless perspective. (125)

The events in Schulz's prose can always be not so much undone as *redone* by a new version, a fresh turn, another transformation in the order of things. When Ficowski talks about the "laws of nature," he refers to Schulzian catalogue of biological rhythms, historical upheavals and psychological changes. The concept of "fluctuation" is common to all these different aspects of human reality; it brings together science, art and the humanities. But, as Ficowski points out, change in Schulz is always ambivalent, simultaneously wrapped in anxiety over the loss of the known and the excitement over uncovering the unknown. The focus on the very moment of leaving one state of things and moving into another configuration is the most fruitful way of seeing Schulz's work – an expression of the present, as well as a nostalgic account of the past and a veiled prophecy of the future.

The writing of Bruno Schulz stems from a certain conformity, even stagnation, that life under the Austro-Hungarian Empire imposed, but it also reflects the immediacy of changes that were brought on by the dissolution of that empire at the time when Schulz

was writing his stories – the period following the end of WWI. In “Spring” Schulz’s narrator gives expression to the stultifying quality of life under Franz Joseph I, but also recognizes the potential for change. A stamp album figures as an introduction to the kaleidoscope of perfect, minute images that foretell worlds other than the domain of Franz Joseph I:

At that time, the world was totally encompassed by Franz Joseph I. On all the horizons there loomed this omnipresent and inevitable profile, shutting the world off, like a prison. And just when we had given up hope and bitterly resigned ourselves inwardly to the uniformity of the world – the powerful guarantor of whose narrow immutability was Franz Joseph I – then suddenly O God, unaware of the importance of it, You opened before me that stamp album, You allowed me to cast a look on its glimmering colors, on the pages that shed their treasures, one after another, ever more glaring and more frightening ... What a dazzling relativism, what a Copernican deed, what flux of all categories and concepts! O God, so there were uncounted varieties of existence! (CW 129)

The Galician world had been efficiently guarded by the Emperor Franz Joseph I and “his estate of prose” for over one century (CW 129). The Emperor’s influence was felt not only in the politics of the region, but more importantly for Schulz’s narrator, it shaped the very experience of being in that part of the world. It infused the atmosphere of the place with stagnant air, resistant to revolutions, or any drastic change for that matter. Drab Galicia stands in sad opposition to the exotic locales pictured in the stamp album. Structured by a labyrinthine bureaucracy and imperial hierarchy, this economically-challenged province was the forgotten backwaters for the glamorous center of the empire:

*fin-de-siècle* Vienna.<sup>17</sup> The Austrian administration insisted on Galicia's agricultural economic profile in order to secure a steady food supply to the empire and a market for industrial products made in the wealthier and more advanced regions of the empire.

Franz Joseph I appears in Schulz's fiction as a dichotomous figure. On one hand, he is the agent of boredom and uniformity: "Franz Joseph squared the world like paper, regulated its course with the help of patents, held it within procedural bounds, and insured it against derailment into things unforeseen, adventurous, or simply unpredictable" (CW 152). On the other hand, he is also the guarantor of permanence and peace: "On each stamp, on every coin, and on every postmark his likeness confirmed its stability and the dogma of its oneness" (CW 129). Ideologically, then, his figure embodies protectionist politics, with skeptical stance with regard to aggressive modernizing practices.

The empire enforced conformity, but at the same time it shielded the forgotten province from industrial and political revolutions, allowing small towns like Drohobycz (Schulz's hometown) to continue their sleepy existence. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Drohobycz was an anachronism, mostly owing to an outdated economy that relied on the enterprise of a few patrician merchants. Schulz's father was one of these; he owned a dry goods store. Whenever Schulz's narrator assumes a nostalgic note, it is to

---

<sup>17</sup> Bohdan Budurowycz well describes the character of Galicia:

Within the colorful but anachronistic conglomerate of peoples, cultures, and religions known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire – a dynastic, haphazardly formed state, whose very existence on the map of modern Europe seemed to defy logic and common sense – Galicia occupied a lowly position, befitting its status as one of the poorest and most backward provinces of the whole realm. Culturally oriented towards Western Europe while artificially separated from its spiritual roots in the north and in the east, Galicia was a region suffering from an acute identity crisis and divided against itself, in which two Slavic peoples – the Poles and the Ukrainians – lived side by side in a strange and tenuous love-hate relationship, and where the third most numerous community – the Jewish – subsisted in a partly enforced, partly self-imposed isolation, looking with apprehension and foreboding for portents of any adversity that might endanger its precarious existence. (359)

talk about this anachronistic world held in its place by Franz Joseph I and, on a smaller scale, by the Father (the central character in Schulz's stories). During Schulz's youth, Drohobycz earned its livelihood from an assortment of small businesses and agriculture. The local shopkeepers and artisans worked according to the early nineteenth-century codes of trade and proudly defended their businesses from modern commercialization, even at the cost of serious impoverishment.

Schulz's narrator, however, does not remain in the nostalgic past. Much of his storytelling concerns the present, the time when Schulz came of age and began writing: the first decades of the twentieth century. During that period, the world of his childhood all but disappeared. A series of changes altered Galicia and the way of life that its inhabitants were used to. The old world began to vanish around 1904, when Drohobycz and a number of surrounding towns found themselves in the middle of a newly discovered oil field. Soon followed the development of the international oil industry in Galicia, as well as the formation of its new and numerous working class. The foreign-sponsored industrialization brought on with this development quickly disrupted the leisurely rhythm of life in Drohobycz and forcefully transformed it into a gray industrial base that would service the oil business at the lowest cost possible and with total disregard for the local community. The industrial revolution reached Poland and other Eastern European nations much later than the rest of Europe. At the beginning of the twentieth century, those already industrialized areas of Europe were entering the post-capitalist commodity model, while East Central Europe was still making the transition from a pre-capitalist agrarian economy into the industrial stage.

In 1905, Einstein unveiled his theory of relativity. In 1914, the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the nephew of the Emperor Franz Joseph I, catapulted Europe into the greatest war in its history. In 1916, Franz Joseph I died. The end of WWI (1918) returned Galicia to Poland (the nation that had had administrative power over Galicia until 1772). In 1919, Communists organized an armed revolt in Drohobycz. Between 1918 and 1939, the Polish rightist paramilitary movement along with the radical Ukrainian forces terrorized ethnic minorities in the area.<sup>18</sup> WWII juggled Galicia between the German and the Russian occupiers, while the SS and the Gestapo annihilated its Jewish population. In 1945, the territory was incorporated into the Soviet Union as a part of the Ukraine. For a few decades, these events pulled Schulz's world and its community into a state of permanent change: another Copernican revolution that filled the atmosphere with "dazzling relativism" (CW 129). In his stories, Schulz does his best to represent the fear, hope and surprise that these economic and historical changes evoked.

Without naming the names (the words "Poland," "Galicia," "Austro-Hungary" or "Drohobycz" are never used), or trying to explain the political impetus behind these transformations, the narrator captures the transformative moment and by doing so tries to subvert the usual inconspicuousness of history. Because, although the aforementioned changes were world-altering, the news reports and chronicles published at the time were quick to whitewash them as orderly sequences of cause and effect. Instead, Schulz, by employing the motif of metamorphosis, undercuts the classifying impulse and reflects the strangeness of the world spinning in the motion of events. As a representative of the East Central European province, and consequently a member of a collectivity detached from

---

<sup>18</sup> Since the Middle Ages, Galicia was a multiethnic society. Apart from Poles and Ukrainians, the region was peopled by Jews, Armenians, Slovaks, Gypsies, Hungarians, Germans, and Ruthenians.

the centers of power that instigated the changes, Schulz develops a peripheral vision of what transpired. This vision is full of irrational (often supernatural) events that stand in for the actual historical events, or rather for the impressions that these events imprinted on the population of East Central Europe – the people who found themselves in the flux of forces that were incomprehensible and extraneous to their daily lives.

The uncanniness of history comes to the reader by means of magic realism. This technique reforms and invalidates the code of nineteenth-century realism, much in the way that postcolonial discourses are parasitic of the language of the oppressor but destabilize this very language. Magic realism is realism pushed to the extreme, a hyper-realism. One can see magic as hyper-logic, a way of thinking that overemphasizes causality and draws connections that present human life and history as determined by grand determinants (which usually escape definition) bigger than politics and economy. Schulz's magic realism helps the provincial subject make sense of the enforced currents of history by introducing a pause in history, by exposing history as always a mixture of magic and logic. This strategy is especially important when people are victimized by a history that they can neither control nor comprehend. It allows them to avoid pure mythologizing which ultimately cuts the subject away from the living experience. This kind of isolation of the subject from the lived reality happens when fundamentalist religious thinking takes over the magical understanding of the world, which insists on finding connections against the apparent irrationality of events.

Schulz's narrator is always aware of the realistic surface of existence: he knows its code of gestures, the external mechanics of events and situations, and the *savoir-faire* of the human language. However, these merely form a loose epidermis without roots: the

“web of reality,” as Schulz calls it (“An Essay for S.I. Witkiewicz,” CW 367). This breakable membrane is repeatedly lifted off and grafted onto imagined realities that are governed by one law: the law of transformation or, as Schulz calls it – “fermentation” (CW 367). These realities live their own life, the life of change – heterogeneous and incredible, not to be harnessed by a single interpretation. They are the site of hallucinatory visions, perverse metamorphosis and metaphors that have a tendency to materialize. Because the law of fermentation applies to history as well as textuality, these stories, especially on the level of form, provide an imaginative but also a fairly accurate portrayal of the reconstruction of reality initiated by the dissolution of one of the largest dynastic empires of Europe.

Metamorphosis is the principal operative in Schulz’s stories. He uses it to abolish the nineteenth-century “communal attunement,”<sup>19</sup> as well as all belief in certitude, predictability and unity of the Habsburg world. By employing highly metaphoric language and fantastic events in narratives that are otherwise faithful to detail and precise in depicting the everyday reality, the texts point out the irrational leaps of knowledge and the arbitrariness of human discourses that led to the formation and the subsequent dissolution of the imperial order. The stories, through the use of a certain surreal quality, put in question the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. Schulz never allows either the real or the surreal to take over entirely, which makes him the supreme writer of *the modern fantastic* as Tzvetan Todorov defined it. In *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Todorov divides literature that engages the supernatural into three sub-genres: *the uncanny*, works of literature that leave the laws of reality intact

---

<sup>19</sup> Term coined by Stanley Cavell in his *The Claim of Reason*, and presented as the foundation of knowledge that originates in a set of shared social conventions and linguistic agreements, rather than a preexisting reality.

and allow for a reasonable explanation of the supernatural phenomena described; *the marvelous*, where all the laws of reality are suspended and the supernatural replaces the real (as in fairy tales); and *the fantastic*, the category that straddles the line between *the uncanny* and *the marvelous* by not allowing the reader to explain the supernatural away or to accept it as just an imaginary creation. Todorov's definition of *the fantastic* coincides with Hollaman and Young's definition of magic realism, which they insist must always maintain a disquieting duality of the real and the unreal (2). Stephen Slemon, in his readings of postcolonial literature, sees the duality inherent in magic realist texts as an expression of a clash between two modes of the postcolonial subject's engagement with history: between the enforced official imperial account of history and the "alchemical process" of inventing history by a dispossessed subject (414).

Todorov juxtaposes the modern tales of Kafka and classic nineteenth-century tales of the fantastic (Cazotte, Maupassant, Hoffman) in order to illustrate how the modern fantastic treats the irrational as though it were a part of reality. Schulz, like Kafka, makes his world, the characters in it, and the reader obey the hyper-logic of a dream world. In classic nineteenth-century examples of the literature of the fantastic, supernatural events take place in an immutable, external reality. The supernatural element constitutes a break in the system of pre-established rules only to conform to them, and ultimately justify the laws of the real. Todorov states:

If certain events of a book's universe explicitly account for themselves as imaginary, they thereby contest the imaginary nature of the rest of the book.

If a certain apparition is only the fruit of an overexcited imagination, then everything around it is real. Far from being a praise of the imaginary, then



the literature of the fantastic posits the majority of a text as belonging to reality. (168)

In other words, the fantastic in its classic version is an unfortunate accident, an exception that proves the rule of reality. If the supernatural is employed, it is only to narrate the taboo themes (incest, homosexuality, drugs, madness, etc.), thus making them more acceptable for a censor. The supernatural in nineteenth-century literature exempts “difficult” topics from the action of the law. Its main role is to transgress the law: the law that could be broken but never questioned.

The fantastic of the twentieth century (magic realism) adopts the supernatural in order to suggest that this very quality somehow manifests the dilemma of modern life, shaped by “experiences of extremity – of random victimization, of powerlessness, of hysteria and panic before unmanageable events” (Foster 271).<sup>20</sup> When people assume animal forms in this fiction, no one is surprised or hesitant to acknowledge those events. There are no detectives that set out to explain the unfathomable, and the denouement that would bring the state of affairs to a final equilibrium never comes. In fact, disequilibrium is the norm. The reader of Kafka and Schulz has to abandon what used to be the major denominator of the fantastic in the nineteenth century – identification with the chief character as to the nature of an uncanny event. In twentieth-century tales of the fantastic, it is only the reader who hesitates, and even this hesitation usually disappears. The characters that undergo, for example, theriomorphic changes accept them as perfectly possible. Kafka’s Gregor Samsa knows from the moment he opens his eyes that his three pairs of legs and armor-plated back is “no dream.” Though the insect’s relatives have some qualms about

---

<sup>20</sup> In his reading of *The White Hotel*, John Burt Foster considers the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Central Europe as a locus of historical conditions that prompted the development of magic realism.

embracing Gregor's new form, there soon comes "the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience, nothing but patience" ("The Metamorphosis," CS 122). If the reader chooses to identify with the protagonist it is necessary to leave reason behind, to "exercise patience," and understand that the disequilibrium provoked by the supernatural event is a feature of all reality. Through this move, common logic is seduced by hyper-logic, with its absurd but possible connections. As a result, the reader is confronted with "a generalized fantastic which swallows up the entire world of the book and the reader along with it" (Todorov 174).

Metamorphosis is one of the most pronounced elements of magic realism in Schulz. In his work, metamorphosis becomes the major tool to break the limits between reality and imagination, matter and spirit, the past and the present. The reader witnesses Father's endless incarnations and gets accustomed to the fact that his human appearance is fleeting and insignificant in a world where biological "matter" is endowed with infinite possibilities. Father is caught up in the state of the "in-between." His bodily transformations and the transformations of the environment that he initiates are the norm – the oozing, budding and generative matter tries to escape the "tyranny of form" ("Tailors' Dummies," SC 64). Father Jacob's versatile incarnations never alert his relatives; their lack of disbelief surpasses that of the unruffled Samsa family.

Despite many similarities in Kafka's and Schulz's use of metamorphosis, one immediately notices that, while Kafka's transformed characters are usually doomed to remain in their "new skins," Schulz's Father Jacob sheds his "skins" and disintegrates, only to appear in the next episode as a swarm of "blind moths" (CW 239) or an "old ill-

tempered fox” (CW 47). Another significant difference is that Father is the active participant in metamorphosis, not a passive victim of it.

On the one hand, this endless chain of transformations in Schulz might signify Father’s identity crisis in the face of the dissolution of his old-fashioned business, the changing notions of time and space, and the very real threats to his and his family’s life brought on by political struggles in the region. On the other hand, the cheerful and trivial atmosphere that surrounds these metamorphoses suggests a cunning strategy actively implemented by this character to prevent such a crisis. Father Jacob lives through many deaths; the narrator of “Father’s Last Escape” admits: “My father had been dying a number of times, always with some reservations that forced us to revise our attitude towards the fact of death” (CW 261). Father annihilates the demarcation between life and death by swiftly moving from one side to the other. His dying means nothing more than assuming another form of life.

This symbolic attitude towards death is a conscious play with a worldview that allows for the merging of history and metaphysics. It harkens back to what Benedict Anderson sees as a feature of the pre-nationalist, largely religious, imagined communities built around imperial dynasties, whose legitimacy derived from divinity, and who cultivated “a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable, the origins of the world and of men essentially identical. Combined, these ideas rooted human lives firmly in the very nature of things, giving certain meaning to the everyday fatalities of existence (above all death, loss, and servitude) and offering, in various ways, redemption from them” (36). Here, Anderson describes an imagination

which fuses theology with earthly existence and excuses the discontinuity of a single human life by the eternal continuity of the world (and the ruling dynasty).

Schulz's narrator acknowledges and simultaneously satirizes this kind of thinking by placing his Father – a bankrupt Jewish merchant – in the privileged position of a dynast, an immortal pillar of the empire, the source of power from without.<sup>21</sup> The fact that Father is immortal, but his immortality forces him into the bodies of rather inferior creatures (e.g. a condor, a fly, a cockroach, a crab, and a crayfish) defines his eternal life as a farce, not a sign of divinity. Furthermore, the family's indifference to Father's supernatural powers and his own willed isolation make the reader doubt his central patriarchal position:

We ceased to pay attention to these oddities in which Father became daily more and more involved. Almost completely rid of bodily needs, not taking any nourishment for weeks, he plunged deeper every day into some strange and complex affairs that were beyond our understanding. To all our persuasions and our entreaties, he answered in fragments of his interior monologue, which nothing from the outside could disturb. Constantly absorbed, morbidly excited, with flushes on his dry cheeks, he did not notice us or even hear us any more. (SC 43-44)

Father's experiments with changing life forms are perceived as "oddities" that remove him from the life of his family. His acts and words are signs of a state of progressive solipsism. This state is presented as an illness (perhaps a delusion of grandeur), accompanied by fever and perverse excitement. The family's attempts to converse with

---

<sup>21</sup> Russell E. Brown analyzes the parallel drawn by the narrator between the authority of Father and that of Franz Joseph I in terms of their role in presiding over the narrator's idyllic childhood and their coinciding deaths (123).

Father are met with stubborn spurts of “interior monologue” on his part. Although endowed with the supernatural power to go on forever, his position as the omnipotent ruler of his family’s microcosm is inevitably waning as he falls out of time: “We became used to his harmless presence, to his soft babbling, and the child-like self-absorbed twittering, which sounded as if they came from the margin of our own time” (44). The metaphysical connection that used to secure Father’s superior status quo is becoming increasingly obscure and esoteric.

It is important, however, to stress that the character of Father is presented by the narrator as not only an object of ridicule but also one of sincere admiration. That dual attitude illustrates the ambivalence of modern man bidding farewell to an inadequate but at the same time compensatory and reassuring worldview:

Without any support, without recognition on our part, that strangest of men was defending the lost cause of poetry. He was like a magic mill, into the hoppers of which the bran of empty hours was poured, to re-emerge flowering in all the colors and scents of oriental spices. But, used to the splendid showmanship of that metaphysical conjurer, we were inclined to underrate the value of his sovereign magic, which saved us from the lethargy of empty days and nights. (51)

So, although on the one hand Father is associated with Franz Joseph I, because like the emperor he is remembered as the comforting center of the narrator’s pre-modern, idyllic childhood, his authority derives not only from an arbitrary association with divinity (the old principle of imperial Legitimacy), but from Father’s talent to shed his spirited

creativity over the provincial landscape that has been muted by Franz Joseph's "rules of prose, by the pragmatism of boredom" (CW 152).

Consequently, in Schulz's fiction, Father is the locus of two coexisting but mutually incompatible modes of engagement with history: the linear imperial system of control imposed by the metropolitan center upon the impoverished province is juxtaposed with multidirectional dispersal of the official order realized through abstract flights of fantasy. Franz Joseph's "estate of prose" coexists with Father's "cause of poetry."

This juxtaposition and the endless wrestling of two mutually exclusive discourses provides an opportunity to envision a third way that would somehow reconcile the imperial fixity of history with the unbridled utopia of isolated and muted voices of history. Schulz's narrative entertains a critique of imperialism without falling into a trap of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the "reverse ethnocentric narrativization" – a way of opposing imperial discourse by constructing an equally totalizing contestation that paradoxically confirms the very discourse it contests. She claims that it is ultimately impossible to construct effectively the unquestionable 'subaltern' consciousness within any code of representation (28). Schulz, however, by placing realism side by side with fantasy, allows for suspended representation, where neither of the two representational modes can take over. This environment is ideal for constructing the imperial subject's heterogeneity, which must creatively adopt and modify the imperial discourse in conjunction with the portrayal of the imperial subject's voiceless otherness.

As played out in Schulz's fiction, the inadequacy of the conception of history as cosmology was exacerbated not only by the fact that the era of dynastic imperialism was ending at the time, but also by the acknowledgment of the emerging autocracy of

mechanical reproduction, which gave rise to new forms of imperial conquest – economic rather than military. This period of European history is marked by important shifts in the *modus operandi* of imperialism. Not only do the major world empires collapse around this time (the fall of Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, the succession of the British Empire by the Commonwealth in 1931, the Weimar Republic's abolishment of several German constitutional monarchies, the dissolution of tsarism in the Russian Revolution), but the perception of imperialism itself changes. Between the two World Wars imperialism changes its meaning from a mostly military domination of powers on the continent of Europe, to the economic dependency between the First World powers and the Third World countries.

Fredric Jameson in *Modernism and Imperialism* explains this shift in the semantics of imperialism, “[...] in that older period, from 1884 to World War I, the relationship between First and Third World was masked and displaced by an overriding (and perhaps ideological) consciousness of imperialism as being essentially a relationship between First World powers or the holders of the Empire, and this consciousness tended to repress the more basic axis of otherness, and to raise issues of colonial reality only incidentally” (48). Furthermore, Jameson argues that the changes in the perception of imperialism taking place in the consciousness of Europe at this time reverberate in the changes in literary subjects and literary styles. He suggests that it is during the interwar period that the colonial periphery finally gains some literary presence. The other of imperial Europe speaks up and builds the foundation of its own remembrance which the rest of the twentieth century will then amplify within the framework of the post-colonial literature and theory.

The new modes of production alienated the human being from the lived experience of the world. They also rendered it difficult to explain human existence as one aspect of the all-encompassing and centripetal totality. In the same way that a subject of a collapsing dynastic empire found himself/herself in a world devoid of divinity (the emperor being its earthly embodiment) and thus de-centered, modern man faced the fragmentation of reality stemming from the intrusion of mechanical equipment in the processes that shape human perception and experience. In his stories, Schulz gives expression to the anxiety and inspiring excitement that these political and economic changes effected upon the inhabitants of the East Central European periphery.

In “Tailors’ Dummies,” he employs the motif of metamorphosis to highlight the ambiguous relationship that modern man has with the fleeting material reality surrounding him, and especially with the products of his own labor. In this story, as in most of Schulz’s fiction, Father is the central character. In the middle of a very bleak winter season, he usurps the role of the supreme craftsman, the Demiurge, and sets out to experiment with “matter,” while delivering to the members of his household audience his version of Genesis.

Father’s favorite materials are cheap and mass-produced. His creative manifesto explains: “...we shall not insist either on durability or solidity of workmanship; our creations will be temporary, to serve for a single occasion” (61). Perishable materials and poor workmanship mark Father’s creations with a transient quality. Father, with playful irony, vindicates *tandeta* (Polish word for a makeshift and poorly made product). *Tandeta* stands in opposition to kitsch because it does not try to conceal its failure to imitate that which is beautiful or ideal. It is defined by the lack of mimetic aspiration and its



dissociation from the original. Unlike the Benjaminian artisan who “has access to the innermost chamber of the realm of created things” (107), Father contemplates surface:

“Can you understand,” asked my father, “the deep meaning of that weakness, that passion for colored tissue, for papier-mâché, for distemper, for oakum and sawdust? This is,” he continued with a pained smile, “the proof of our love for matter as such, for its fluffiness or porosity, for its unique mystical consistency. Demiurge, the great master and artist, made matter invisible, made it disappear under the surface of life. We, on the contrary, love its creaking, its resistance, its clumsiness. We like to see behind each gesture, behind each move, its inertia, its heavy effort, its bear-like awkwardness.” (SC 62).

Father overturns the usual hierarchy of spirit over matter and falls in love with recycled materials, with their raw nature and undeniable cumbersome presence. The “skin” of things, in its essential being in time and space, is brought onto “the surface of life,” in an act that contrasts the legerdemain of representation with the “inertia” of sheer being. Father’s experiments are a parody of Genesis. Instead of breathing life into dust, he shapes sawdust into a modern golem, a puppet without the strings: a tailor’s dummy, a mere three dimensional model of a human body. Father seems to be looking for the life force in the texture of things. His focus on the material side of an artifact is a symptom of modern consciousness, which Benjamin believed to be conditioned by the decomposition of the aura: “To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is a mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction” (223).

In “Tailors’ Dummies,” Schulz addresses the reverberations that the turn of the twentieth century set off among the population of Galician province. The story depicts the struggle of two paradigms of creation and two disparate attitudes towards man’s place within material reality. The traditional, mostly agrarian, community that was used to perceiving its subjugation to the imperial center in terms of the metaphysics of nature encountered events that thrust this community into history, and in turn forced it to challenge established power relations. In terms of creation, the perspective shifts along the trajectory of seeing man as an artisan in God’s workshop to seeing man as a worker in another man’s factory. The relationship to material reality changes from satisfying but complacent service in the name of God to a questionable and isolating servitude in the name of a wealthy industrialist.

As Benjamin explains, the mode of mechanical reproduction severed human creativity from its origin in ritual, and placed it squarely in the realm of politics. In the story, Father contrasts his creative agency with that of God and admits to circumventing sacred methods, “The Demiurge was in possession of important and interesting creative recipes...No one knows whether these recipes will ever be reconstructed. But this is unnecessary, because even if the classical methods of creation should prove inaccessible for evermore, there still remain some illegal methods, an infinity of heretical and criminal methods” (60). Father recognizes man’s power to intervene in God’s scheming, or at least to reject His order of things. He molds material reality with little effort in a very short time. Once again in Schulz’s fiction, Father becomes the site of ambivalent sentiments. He is both a greedy entrepreneur who uses the shabbiest materials and

dishonest means to make a profit and an old merchant running his business according to the respectful but extinct code of nineteenth-century commerce.

In “Dead Season,” Father’s textile shop functions as a temple of trade, a place where the exchange of money for fabric is a mere pretext for conducting elaborate rituals with customers and other merchants, accompanied by long conversations, jokes and frequent meals. The shop, including the shop assistants, constitutes an integral part of Father’s household and regulates the rhythm of his family life: “In the downstairs rooms lived the shop assistants and sometimes during the night we were awakened by their nightmares” (SC 37). The public realm is an extension of the private sphere. Father’s business is much more than a source of income:

My father suffered when he saw the downfall of the retail textile trade.

Who of the present generation of textile merchants remembered the good traditions of their ancient art? Which of them knew, for instance, that pieces of cloth, laid in a stack on display shelves in accordance with the principles of textile art, could emit under the touch of a finger running downward a sound like a descending scale? Which among his contemporaries was conversant with the finer points of style in the exchange of notes, memos, and letters?

How many still remembered the charm of merchant diplomacy, the diplomacy of the good old school, the exciting stages of negotiation...? (CW 192)

Here Schulz captures one of the major shifts in the economic life of Europe. In 1904, Max Weber theorized this shift as a cultural transition from the so called “adventure capitalism,” characterized by a belief in irrational and speculative forces, to “rational capitalism,” which relied on the “development of rational economic conduct,” that was

free from “spiritual obstacles” (26-27). Weber links the development of rational capitalism in the West with the “elimination of magic from the world” (105), of which the ascetic Puritans were the greatest promoters. They replaced all sacramental (ritualistic) means to salvation by labor (a calling) and the accumulation of capital, which was a visible marker of one’s dedication to labor in God’s name.

Interestingly, Weber lists the separation of business from the household as one of the most important factors in the process of rationalizing modern economic conduct. He also points to the Jewish tradition as the cultural seat of “irrational” adventure capitalism. In “Dead Season” Father is a defender of this pre-modern form of capitalism. He perceives his trade to be an “ancient art” that is passed on from generation to generation and requires initiation. The secrets of Father’s trade are not about maximizing profit; rather, they contain recipes for arranging the bales of fabric in such a way that they could emit music (“a sound like a descending scale”), for cultivating a unique manner of written and spoken interaction with customers, which would provide “charm” and “excitement” for both sides, and for conducting transactions “in an exalted mood” (CW 193). In other words, Father practices his trade as a combination of an aesthetic expression, collective ritual and commerce.

In his conflicted portrayal of Father’s attitudes towards his enterprise, Schulz offers a vision of engagement with material reality in which the sacred collides with the profane. On some occasions, the narrator presents Father as a high priest, a magician of matter, “...in contact with that strange man, all things reverted, as it were, to the roots of their existence, rebuilt their outward appearance anew from their metaphysical core” (SC 58). At other times, Father turns into a stingy capitalist planning to build efficient

assembly-line workers; he proclaims that these “creations will be temporary, to serve for a single occasion,” and they will have “only one profile, one hand, one leg, the one limb needed for their role” (SC 61). The duality of this character reflects not so much a displacement of one economic mode by another, but instead an extended moment of vacillation between the two modes: that which was and that which is to come. Creating such a narrative moment allows for rejecting the dialectical movement of history and pressing the reader to resolve the indeterminacy on his/her own.

But the rapidity with which Schulzian metamorphoses take place stresses the rare occurrence of such a moment arrested in time – an interval when difference facilitates a more conscious construction of an identity – and its ultimate termination under the pressure of historical continuity, even if that continuity is a matter of invention. The tension between the formless sense of being outside of time and the need to organize the experience of living illustrates Schulz’s philosophical stance on the value and character of reality. In his letter to Witkiewicz he comments:

The substance of reality exists in a state of constant germination, hidden life. It contains no dead, hard, limited objects. Everything diffuses beyond its borders, remains in a given shape only momentarily, leaving this shape behind at the first opportunity. A principle of sorts appears in the habits, the modes of existence of this reality: universal masquerade... The migration of forms is the essence of life. (CW 369)

This vision of reality as governed by one principle echoes the theory of Neutral Monism formulated at the turn of the century by William James (later developed by Bertrand Russell). The main claim of the theory is that the world consists of one kind of entity

which is neither mental nor physical, but rather neutral. In his attempt to define the “neutral principle,” James replaced the concept of human consciousness with the idea of “pure experience,” which is neither mental nor material: “The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the ‘pure’ experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple *that*” (23). Schulz’s “universal masquerade,” like James’s empiricism, places the stress on the presentness and the fleeting nature of reality. Given Schulz’s milieu, it is easy to imagine that the transience of experience – Benjamin’s angel of history caught in a storm<sup>22</sup> – would take over his worldview and give agency to an abstract universal force rather than to human subjectivity.

In his project of illustrating the workings of the “universal masquerade,” Schulz devotes much attention to the concept of space. This particular focus brings his work to the very center of postcolonial discourse, which often deals with the symbolic relationship of the colonial subject to space (e.g. via themes of land occupation, exploration, and travel). The deconstruction and reconstruction of space becomes a means for the post-colonial subject to regain his/her identity and reconnect with local history. Reclaiming space within the realm of the imaginary can be as significant as taking over a real geographical area. Culture is always embedded in a certain space, but to a large degree that space is a function of representation.

---

<sup>22</sup> In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin writes:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (257-58).

Benedict Anderson sees three instruments of representation as most influential in the imperial conquest of colonized worlds; they are the census, the map, and the museum (163). The imperial state used these three representational institutions to establish the preferred “nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry” (164). Maps, especially after print technology made them easily available to the imagination of the masses, have had a significant weight in the colonizing mission because of their shorthand form and the visual appeal. Anderson explains:

European-style maps worked on the basis of a totalizing classification, and led their bureaucratic producers and consumers towards policies with revolutionary consequences. Ever since John Harrison’s 1761 invention of the chronometer, which made possible the precise calculation of longitudes, the entire planet’s curved surface had been subjected to a geometrical grid which squared off empty seas and unexplored regions in measured boxes. The task of, as it were, ‘filling in’ the boxes was to be accomplished by explorers, surveyors, and military forces. (173)

Considering the role that cartography played in the history of European colonial domination, it is not surprising that the motif of the map would also become one of the favorite points of departure in numerous post-colonial narratives.

The map, like all literature, relies on the play between absence and presence: it is a device for imposing invisible contours of one’s dream onto reality. This textuality of the map is the reason why cartography has been such an effective tool of imperial control and, on the other hand, why it was recognized by post-colonial writers as a unique space

for subversive reimagining of colonial geography. In his analysis of the application of the map motif in the post-colonial texts, Graham Huggan, using Derrida's concept of the "centered structure," claims that "the prevalence of the map topos in contemporary post-colonial literary texts, and the frequency of its ironic and/or parodic usage in these texts, suggests a link between a de/reconstructive reading of maps and a revisioning of the history of European colonialism" (123).

Such a playful rereading of cartography, which defies our expectations with regard to mapping things out, appears in Schulz's work. He opens his story "The Street of Crocodiles" with a captivating *ekphrastic* description of an antique document, a beautiful city map, which the narrator finds in Father's desk.<sup>23</sup> On the first glance, it is a wall map – "a bird's-eye panorama" (SC 99). But upon closer inspection, the map becomes three-dimensional, and it materializes what it is supposed to represent. As the ekphrasis unfolds, the reader is able to enter the territory from the map. What follows, however, defies the usual expectations that one has when reading a map. Instead of conquering and ordering the space, this map offers an obscure and confusing picture, which emerges from a "faded distance" and appears as an "undifferentiated mass at first," filled with a "dense complex" of structures and crowded with the "complicated and manifold profusion of streets and alleyways, the sharp lines of cornices, architraves, [and] archivolts" (SC 99-100). As it straddles the line between appearance and disappearance, this description challenges the reader's ability to imagine the space in question. In

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ekphrasis* is a rhetorical tool that originated in the Classical era. It is a form of poetic description that takes as its subject a work of art, a physical object, or a visual scene (e.g. Virgil's description of Achilles' shield in *Aeneid* or Flaubert's description of Charles' hat at the beginning of *Madame Bovary*). The purpose of *ekphrasis* is to recreate, in the mind's eye, an exact replica of a tangible piece of visual reality. A skillfully composed *ekphrasis* provides a copy of an aspect of reality that is persuasive enough to exist and evoke impressions of its own, apart from the original.



addition to topographic confusion, the reader has to face a disturbance of vision. The landscape is wrapped in “the deep sepia of shade,” and “the solids and prisms of that shade darkly honeycombed the ravines of streets, drowning in a warm color here half a street, there a gap between houses. They dramatized and orchestrated in a bleak romantic chiaroscuro the complex architectural polyphony” (SC 100). The play of light and shadow mobilizes space, throwing the observer into navigational uncertainty. The decomposition of cartographic space and the unstable visual perspective draw attention to the ultimate relativity of spatial perception and the impossibility of “fixing” people and places.

In her study of the fantastic in literature, Rosemary Jackson contemplates the subversive potential of fantastic topographies precisely in their refusal to remain definable and transparent:

An emphasis upon invisibility points to one of the central thematic concerns of the fantastic: problems of vision. In a culture which equates the ‘real’ with the ‘visible’ and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs, the un-real is that which is in-visible. That which is not seen, or which threatens to be un-seeable, can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes ‘I see’ synonymous with ‘I understand.’ (45)

Schulz’s map is a baroque assemblage of shapes, which seem to pulsate with multiplicity, instead of succumbing to the abbreviating principle of mapping. The description of what the map is supposed to depict blocks the ‘I see’-therefore -‘I understand’ logic. Against all effort to visualize what is being pictured, the reader gets more and more disoriented

with each word of the elaborate *ekphrasis*, more and more distrustful of the narrator's intentions.

As the story continues, however, it becomes obvious that the narrator's goal is to show how arbitrary signs, of which a map is a metonym, fail to capture the full extent of reality, and especially how the signs omit moments of transformation. By making his description of a map vacillate between a flat surface and a three-dimensional space, between a precise blueprint and a jumbled landscape, Schulz's narrator forces the reader to rethink his/her attitudes towards place. The issue of redefining place acquires a political context for the reader who was Schulz's contemporary. The story's deconstruction of an old map would necessarily echo the actual remapping of the East Central European territory taking place at the time.<sup>24</sup>

The narrator rolls out the old map and paradoxically discovers on it uncharted regions – the Street of Crocodiles and its vicinity. The district surrounding this street, as its dubiously exotic name confirms, consists of alien grey zones in the middle of Europe that have remained in the shade because of their spatial containment dictated by the imperial rule, and which, now, after the dissolution of the dynastic empires, once again appear on the map of the continent. It is significant, however, that these rediscovered territories are marked by the narrator by an awkward phantom quality:

On the map, made in the style of baroque panoramas, the area of the

Street of Crocodiles shone with the empty whiteness that usually marks

---

<sup>24</sup> After the end of World War I, the Allies represented by the "Big Four" (Italy, Britain, France, and the U.S.) have conferred in secret and redrawn the map of Europe. This rather elitist peace conference culminated in the Treaty of Versailles, which reinstated East Central Europe and the Balkans. New countries appeared on the map (Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) and others had their borders redrafted (Austria, Hungary, Romania, and Germany). The arbitrary nature of the new borders would eventually cause even more military conflicts.

polar regions or unexplored countries of which almost nothing is known.

The lines on only a few streets were marked in black and their names given in simple, unadorned lettering, different from the noble script of the other captions. The cartographer must have been loath to include that district in the city and his reservations found expression in the typographical treatment. (SC 100)

The “empty whiteness” among the bustling metropolitan area could be a metaphor for East Central Europe that regained a cartographical presence as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, perhaps against the wish of certain cartographers—politicians who were forced to allow this to happen. The reluctance of including the impoverished and underdeveloped countries to appear on the map is evident in the lack of cartographic décor: “the fatal lack of color, as if that shoddy, quickly growing area could not afford the luxury of it” (SC 102).

On the other hand, the fact that the Street of Crocodiles “shines” with its black-and-white simplicity through the chaotic “baroque” features of the rest of the map makes one think that perhaps the Street of Crocodiles belongs to a different cartographic order altogether, not necessarily inferior. The skeletal nature of the Street of Crocodiles’ contour might even signify its antecedent status on the map, before the colors and the wild, ornate shapes suffocated it with a new vision. Graham Huggan comments on the ability of literature to initiate conceptual displacements that expose the map as an “over-signifying” discourse:

[...] cartographic discourse can be seen to play an exemplary role not only in the demonstration of the empowering strategies of colonialist

rhetoric but in the unwitting exposure of the deficiencies of these strategies.

The “contradictory coherence” implied by the map’s systematic inscription on a supposedly “uninscribed” earth reveals it, moreover, as a palimpsest covering over alternative spatial configurations which, once brought to light, indicate both the plurality of possible perspectives on, and the inadequacy of any single model of, the world. (120)

Aside from the critique of territorial imperialism, “The Street of Crocodiles” provides a skeptical appraisal of the economic form of imperialism. The district that contains the Street of Crocodiles (Galicia under the wave of oil industrialization) secures for itself a geo-political presence (confirmed by a cartographic outline); unfortunately, very soon that presence is compromised by the forces of modernization. Schulz shows how the region aspires to an economic reconstruction, at once suffering from its detrimental effects. The Street of Crocodiles is the center of change, but from the start it is also shown to be the seat of corruption and cultural degradation. The new district is trying to blend in with the old surroundings, yet all it manages to produce is an excess of “miserable imitations of metropolitan splendor” (SC 101).

The Street of Crocodiles tempts the inhabitants of town with its new way of conducting commerce. The narrator builds up the contrast between the past and the present trade modes in the following image:

While in the old city a nightly semi-clandestine trade prevailed, marked by ceremonious solemnity, in the new district modern, sober forms of commercial endeavor had flourished at once. The pseudo-Americanism, grafted on the old, crumbling core of the city, shot up here in a rich but empty

and colorless vegetation of pretentious vulgarity. One could see there cheap jerry-built houses with grotesque façades, covered with monstrous stucco of cracked plaster. (SC 100-101)

As in “Tailors’ Dummies,” the sacred is juxtaposed with the profane, but the two terms of the juxtaposition do not withstand the polarization. The modernized quarter, despite its “sober” energy, is grossly fake. The old town, despite its dignity, is “crumbling” down. The new way is only a graft, but because of its all-pervasive and flexible nature it appeals to the local citizens who, like many East Central Europeans at the time, are tired of the uniformity of the emperor’s old regime. The narrator explains that the most respected residents have fallen under the spell of modernization: “The best among them were not entirely free from the temptation of voluntary degradation, of breaking down the barriers of hierarchy, of immersion in that shallow mud of companionship, of easy intimacy, of dirty intermingling” (SC 101). In opposition to Schulz’s other stories where modern mechanisms of economy seem to alienate people, this narrative points to capitalism’s ability to make the social class boundaries more permeable. This mobility, however, is only unidirectional – from top to bottom. The new economic structure permits the upper classes to enjoy the flavor of lowbrow culture (labeled here as “shallow,” “easy,” and “dirty”) without having to admit the members of that culture to their own ranks.

The Street of Crocodiles offers to its customers a semblance of metropolitan Europe. The shop signs seduce with the multiplicity of foreign languages: “Their large gray display windows bore slanting semicircular inscriptions in the thick gilt letters:

CONFISERIE, MANUCURE, KING OF ENGLAND” (SC 101).<sup>25</sup> Hidden storage rooms operate as brothels and distribution centers for pornography: “There is no need for us to go short of anything ... we even have truly metropolitan vices” (SC 108). Roadways are blocked with the newly introduced network of trains, trams and cabs. The resulting traffic makes the inhabitants “speak about it with pride and a knowing look” (SC 106). There even develops a black market for illegal goods.

But despite all its hustle and bustle, the new district is fatally transient and drained of substance. The materials that make up this district – mostly cardboard, plaster and wax – bring to mind the make-believe spaces of a stage set or a doll house. As the short story progresses, the street and its inhabitants regress first into iconic flatness and eventually into non-being: “[...] the whole scene seems at times like a photograph in an illustrated magazine, so grey, so one-dimensional are the houses, the people and the vehicles” (SC 105). The narrator reveals a sidewalk crowd to be a “sleepy procession of puppets” (SC 106), and a group of people waiting for a train turns out to be “a row of pale cut-out paper figures” (107). The alleys that used to lead to the Street of Crocodiles suddenly become blind, and the “possibilities fade and decline into a void” (109). The city’s façades are once again those of the time- and tradition-honored tailor’s and dry good’s shops. A city boulevard metamorphoses into a road which is made, “like village squares, of beaten clay, full of puddles and overgrown with grass” (SC 105). Even the prostitutes are a sham: “The women of the Street of Crocodiles are depraved to only a modest extent, stifled by thick layers of moral prejudice and ordinary banality” (SC 110). Instead of being powered by electricity, the papier-mâché trams are “pushed by the town porters”

---

<sup>25</sup> In the original version of the story, which was written in Polish, the shop names appear in French and English. The contrast between Polish and these few words in Western languages, some of them misspelled, magnifies the discrepancy of cultural codes that forms the main theme of this narrative.

(SC 107). The narrator concludes his story with the following disclaimer – “The Street of Crocodiles was a concession of our city to modernity and the metropolitan corruption. Obviously, we were unable to afford anything better than a paper imitation, a montage of illustrations cut out from the last year’s moldering newspapers” (110).

The expressed impotence of this city might be interpreted as a failure of modernization, the city’s stubborn adherence to the previous modes of production and the previous way of life. On the other hand, the fact that the narrator presents modernization as synonymous with corruption and the metropolitan innovations as exotic but useless props suggests a different interpretation. The inhabitants of the Street of Crocodiles district (and, by extension, those of Galicia and East Central Europe in general) find themselves at the nexus of changing socio-political paradigms, and although the new paradigm offers new possibilities, it is enforced from the outside just like the old one. The shift from domination of the region by the 636-year-old Austro-Hungarian Empire to domination by the cartel of oil companies from Canada, Britain, Belgium and Germany leaves the local community participating in the transformation only to the extent of “playing it out:”

Reality is as thin as paper and betrays with all its cracks its imitative character. At times one has the impression that it is only the small section immediately before us that falls into the expected pointillistic picture of a city thoroughfare, while on either side, the improvised masquerade is already disintegrating and, unable to endure, crumbles behind us into plaster and sawdust, into the storeroom of an enormous, empty theater. The tenseness of an artificial pose, the assumed earnestness of

a mask, an ironical pathos tremble on this façade. (SC 105)

Here, Schulz's fantastic construct of a highly charged space that presses to emerge only to dissolve itself soon after its momentary appearance functions as a tool of ideological resistance. The inauthenticity of spatial arrangements imposed by the external powers is exposed through the metaphor of a theater. Every new reality is a mask worn for one drama. Underneath all the masks, there is a seamless absence that resonates with the kind of being that negates the prescriptions, separations, and hierarchies of the "masquerade."<sup>26</sup>

But Schulz is careful to stress that this primal absence, the intermission in the play of history, rarely happens and never lasts. Although when it does occur, the "in-between" moment announces an opening that could become the start of an action against victimization by history:

Then the world stood motionless for a while, holding its breath, blinded, wanting to enter whole into that illusory picture, into that provisional eternity that opened up before it. But the enticing offer passed, the wind broke its mirror, and Time took us into his possession once again...

Undefined ourselves, we expected something from Time, which was unable to provide a definition and wasted itself in a thousand subterfuges. (CW 127)

In this excerpt from "Spring," Schulz's narrator imagines a pause in the storm of time; the pause summons a phantasm of eternity -- perhaps a set of romantic ideals. The world faces this seductive utopia of infinity but does not give in, and people are thrust back into

---

<sup>26</sup> Rosemary Jackson finds the "hollow world" to be the most frequent spatial configuration in the literature of the fantastic since the beginning of the nineteenth century. She applies psychoanalysis to interpret these empty landscapes as representations of the "realm before time, before separation into self and other, before the establishment of distinct identities or genders, before the 'fall' into difference and a consciousness of ego, of the 'I' [...]" (46).



the flow of time. Interestingly, time is both an active force that takes control of people and a directionless chain of deception that people surrender to voluntarily. The significance of this passage lies in its laconic evaluation of the three possible ways of engaging with historical reality: an escape from history, a resignation to history, and finally a dialogue with history. The last possibility is only negatively implied by the narrator, but it is not difficult to imagine that for the readers who were Schulz's contemporaries this subtle message carried a weight of a warning: we must pay collective attention to the breaks and discontinuities of time in order to enter history on our own terms.

Schulz's employment of magic realism to depict the Street of Crocodiles' sudden appearances and disappearances, its simultaneous being and non-being, allows the reader to become conscious of the potential consequences of socio-economic transformations and the unique properties of the area onto which the changes are being grafted. This place invites Western influences but not without ironic distancing. At one point, the narrator suggests that the "pretense of a city has some of the features of self-parody" (105). In Schulz, history encounters the dream of history, freedom faces the myth of freedom, and as a result, both must be reexamined. One way to carry out this project of reexamination is through focusing on the ontological instability of space, both fictional and real. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call this strategy "deterritorialization." In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they discuss the subversive nature of the open, decentered and heterogenous structure, which they call a "rhizome." This structure, unlike any hierarchical and genealogical structure, relies on a polymorphous and dissolving multiplicity, rather than a

homogenous and stable organization. Deleuze and Guattari connect their rhizomatic model of spatial existence with the textuality of literature and the world:

The same applies to the book and the world: contrary to a deeply rooted belief, the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world: the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects the reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world (if it is capable, if it can). (11)

Schulz's imaginary world is made of palpable, real-world fabric. This fabric, however, is subject to continuous textual tears, which expand the fictional space into the hidden peripheral landscapes that subsequently materialize. This relationship between fiction and the material world is "neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying" (Deleuze and Guattari 10). Instead of replacing one spatial paradigm by another, Schulz's narrator constructs a fiction/reality rhizome to reflect on the motility of cultural and historical discourses that shape our being in the world.

Schulz's prose, preoccupied with generating moments of symbiosis between myth and history, sets in motion the usually static spatial metaphor. The metaphor somersaults, and, often, turns into a whole series of somersaults. Consequently, the motion of these spatial metaphors replaces the motion of a plot. The narrator tells his stories by drawing extremely dynamic descriptions of his surroundings. This "painting with words" eliminates traditional narration (reporting a series of events), or limits it to the absolute

minimum. In stories like “Nimrod,” “Mr. Charles,” and “A Night in July” narration fully withdraws and gives way to description. Those descriptions organize themselves around images caught in the movement of endless metamorphosis, as in the following account of summer’s night air:

The night air, that black Proteus playfully forming velvety densities streaked with the scent of jasmine, cascades of ozone, sudden airless wastes rising like black globes into the infinite, monstrous grapes of darkness flowing with dark juice! I elbow my way along these tight passages, I lower my head to pass under arches and low vaults, and suddenly the ceiling breaks open with a starry sigh, a wide cupola slides away for a moment, and I am led again between narrow walls and passages. (CW 179)

The summer air is charged with energy and shapes that keep on expanding, and thus intensifying the narrator’s experience of space. Contours are drawn only to be trespassed. The illusion of the centrifugal “blooming” motion is created with the help of the periphrastic metaphor – a list of gradually more complex similes, as when the pockets of fragrant air are characterized at first as simply “velvety densities,” then “black globes,” and finally “monstrous grapes of darkness.”

Each simile is richer than the previous one. It could be said that the narrator gradually reforms the common name, through a litany of periphrastic expressions. Unlike the classic metaphor that replaces conventionalized designation with a poetic image, the periphrastic metaphor simultaneously embraces this designation (“the night air”) and its multiple metaphoric realizations (“velvety densities,” “cascades of ozone,” “black globes,” etc.) Periphrastic metaphor pluralizes perceived reality. By presenting the whole

spectrum of names, the narrating voice discloses his own hesitation in delivering a single interpretation to the object of his perception. It is as if his metaphor documents his epistemological efforts and, at the same time, delivers reality as a function of many choices. In terms of structure, the description “opens up” the text in all directions. Additional chains of images can always be attached, at any point, to these rhizomorphous creations. Theoretically, there are no boundaries that would limit this expansion. Because a simple rule of enumeration guides these constructs, they can be broken into and built upon without disturbing the signification of the neighboring images. Schulz’s world lies there “open, vulnerable and orphaned – waiting for us to be divided and renamed from the beginning” (CW 89).

\*

The recent preoccupation with Bruno Schulz’s legacy in the context of cultural memory of East Central Europe deals with his visual art, and it was spurred by the aftermath of a historical event that took place in his hometown, Drohobycz, on February 9, 2001. On that day, Benjamin Geissler (a German documentary filmmaker and the son of a Schulz scholar) came to Drohobycz and discovered a group of wall paintings by Schulz. The artist painted these polychromes in the summer of 1942 for the son of Felix Landau, the Gestapo officer, who had taken a liking to Bruno Schulz and protected him from the Nazi genocidal policies that were directed against the Jewish population of Drohobycz at the time. In exchange for this protection, Landau commissioned art projects and other odd jobs from Schulz. The murals in question represented a fairy-tale scene that

spread all over the walls of the nursery in Landau's villa. After the war and the reassignment of borders, Drohobycz became a Ukrainian territory, and the villa was subsequently confiscated by communists and parceled into cramped apartments for the Ukrainian working class. The murals were painted over and forgotten. Even upon their discovery by Geissler (documented in his film *Bilder Finden*), these artifacts did not elicit much attention from the art critics or the authorities.

What changed this relative indifference was the murals' controversial disappearance soon after. In May 2001, representatives from Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Israel arrived in Drohobycz and surreptitiously removed some sections of the murals (those that had already been revealed by the Polish art conservationists). Although Yad Vashem claims to have obtained a prior permission from the mayor of Drohobycz, the Ukrainian government (upon external pressure) issued a public statement which interprets the removal as a criminal activity that broke the international law guiding the proper transfer of priceless art. The debate that followed Yad Vashem's unilateral decision to appropriate Schulz's last creative output as a part of the cultural history of the Holocaust can be described as a venomous exchange of more or less nationalistic identity claims among the three parties involved in the conflict: Jews, Poles and Ukrainians. In the course of this dispute the following questions were insistently asked: "Whose is Schulz?" "Was Galicia Polish, Jewish or Ukrainian?"<sup>27</sup> and "Why and how should we remember Schulz?" Most answers offered to these questions tend to be limited to the collective mythologies of the three nation-states. Schulz's own prerogative of always

---

<sup>27</sup> The logic of this question would be rather difficult to fathom for Schulz and his contemporaries who were seldom members of one group exclusively. As Benjamin Paloff explains, today, Schulz himself is "regarded as a kind of cultural bridge: Poles see him as entirely Polish and entirely Jewish at the same time, making him both mysteriously alien and wholly native, an enticingly exotic member of their own family" (2-3).

interrogating myth against history and vice versa somehow got lost in the cries of martyrdom voiced by three peoples whose suffering could never be measured. I believe that one can only answer the questions by going back to Schulz's fictional world which drew its fervent life from the rupture in political discourses and the close attention to the pulse of the Galician province.

### Chapter 3

#### Between and Beyond Modernity: The Vernacular in the Works of Jan Jakub Koloski

“It was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half in the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment. It was also the Enlightenment, with its intellectual centers in Western Europe, that cultivated and appropriated to itself the new notion of ‘civilization,’ an eighteenth-century neologism, and civilization discovered its complement, within the same continent, in shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism. Such was the invention of Eastern Europe.”

- Larry Wolff

“How to define ‘provincialism’? As the inability (or the refusal) to see one’s own culture in the *large context*. There are two kinds of provincialism: of large nations and of small ones [...] Small nations are reticent toward the *large context* for the exact opposite reasons: they hold world culture in high esteem but feel it to be something alien, a sky above their heads, distant, inaccessible, an ideal reality with little connection to their national literature.”

- Milan Kundera

\*

The oppositions between the universal and the local, the communal and the individual, the traditional and the modern have guided the redefinition of Polish identity that has been taking place since 1989. The fall of communism spurred a flux of transformations in almost all aspects of public and private life and subsequently initiated a call for the new set of values that would allow Poles to reinvent themselves. Defensive patriotism, the myth of Polish national martyrdom, and the somewhat inflexible emphasis on the historical past lost their previously unquestionable validity in determining group identity after the country gained back its sovereignty and opened up its borders.

One of the most insightful film directors to contemplate and comment upon the process of rebuilding the post-1989 Polish identity is Jan Jakub Kolski. As an artist who made his debut soon after the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, he offers a voice that echoes the concerns of a whole generation of Poles (and by extension all East Central Europeans) who were forced out of the identity built along the axis of national struggle and cultural perseverance and suddenly had to look for an identity that would accommodate the newly experienced multiplicity of choices, the awareness of contrasts and differences, the lack of singular points of reference (such as the Berlin Wall, for example), and most importantly the need to reexamine historical memory which for far too long has been shaped by fortifying nostalgia.

Jan Jakub Kolski was born in 1956 in Wrocław. As a child, he spent a few years in the village of Popielawy, where he lived with his grandparents. This relocation to the countryside had a clear influence on Kolski's imagination and proved to be the limitless inspiration behind his cinema. Kolski's screen world, like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or García Márquez's Macondo, is a semi-fictional microcosm where the law of the land clashes with modernization, and the past is challenged by the present. Most of Kolski's films are set in a generic Polish village (often shot on location in Popielawy) – a place that is clearly coded as peripheral – and filled with a perspective that paints the rural environment as being both disconcertingly harsh (witness to pogroms, denunciations and violent insurgence) and delightfully enchanting (source of communal identity).

As a young man, in the 70's, Kolski returned to Wrocław, where he found a job at a TV station and gradually worked his way up to the position of the director of



photography. Subsequently, he studied cinematography at the famous film school in Łódź. During the 80's, he made twenty short films, many of which focus on nature and the idea of a place, with its intimate topography, physicality and spirituality. In 1990 he made his first feature film *The Burial of a Potato*. Since his debut, Kolski has been incredibly prolific, releasing a new film every year or every other year. Frequently, he scripts, shoots and directs his own films. Apart from filmmaking, he has directed numerous plays for Polish television, and written short stories, a novel, and a book for children.

During the last fifteen years, Kolski has been one of the most significant film directors in Poland, not only because he is an auteur and creates powerful and easily recognizable films, but also because he was the first to offer Polish audiences a way out of the post-communist flood of Hollywood plagiarism – Polish action films, whose champion and key director is Wladyslaw Pasikowski. Instead of applying the popular Western formulas to the Polish reality, Kolski decided to utilize his experience of living in the Polish countryside and create films that are *vernacular*. I am using this term here to signal Kolski's complex engagement with the quotidian, the local, and the private, on both the level of form and that of content. Kolski's vernacularism seems to arise from the artist's disappointment with anything grand or totalizing and from his sympathy for the socially alienated and culturally dispossessed elements. The etymology of the word "vernacular" points to the Latin *verna* – a home-born slave. I use it here to valorize Kolski's art as an ex-centric discourse that challenges the official history (as well as the hegemonic forces that write it) and provides a voice for the internalized Other (the silenced domestic servant whose efforts uphold the master's status). This vernacularism,

however, needs to be differentiated from the currently popular concept of “small fatherland” (the Polish term “mala ojczyzna” was coined by Stanislaw Vincenz), and the surrounding discourse in the Polish media and arts that links this concept with nationalism and, more dangerously, with the idea of finding the center of the world in one’s nostalgically embellished backyard.

Different versions of “small fatherland” proliferated in the Polish arts immediately upon the dissolution of the homogenized worldview (and its equally monotonous aesthetics) imposed by the Communists. At the time, this concept might have served an important function of allowing Poles to regain their unique sense of place in the otherwise drab reality left by the dying regime. “Small fatherland” developed as one’s imaginary community, imagined against the pervasive and equalizing bleakness of Socialist Realism (Interestingly, the concept has gained even more attention when Poland decided to join The European Union, and the conflict of preserving the national identity in the face of globalization became paramount). It has been a source of comfort (real or imagined) for those who managed to survive communism by trying to ignore it, by holding on tightly to their memories of the pre-war geography, customs, language, and people. Characteristically, those who offered their visions of “small fatherland” (visual artists, writers, TV personalities and politicians) would often link them with their (real or imagined) ties to the Polish aristocracy. This rhetorical move was common enough to be recognized as a symptom of a general desire on the part of the Polish people to diversify – by identifying one’s roots, establishing a class hierarchy, and locating a community tradition that was somehow older and more Polish than the communist “tradition.”

From the beginning, however, much of the “small fatherland” imaginary leaned towards somewhat sentimental reminiscences that idealized religious holidays, glorified the conquests of the grandfathers who partook in various Polish independence movements, mourned the sacred public locations destroyed by the Nazis and Communists, and lamented over the general bastardization of the Polish way of life during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here, it is necessary to note that regionalism and ethnic identity had been celebrated for decades before the collapse of communism by artists like Tadeusz Konwicki (in literature) and Kazimierz Kutz (in cinema). Without directly evoking the concept of “small fatherland,” their works have centered on minority communities and the sense of the provisionality of the nation-state. One might see Kolski’s vernacularism as a continuation of this critically-inclined “peripheral vision.”<sup>28</sup>

Kolski’s cinematic universe is often discussed as his version of “small fatherland,” but there are crucial differences that make Kolski’s vision singular and its impact more complex than a romanticized expression of Polish identity and anti-communist values. His films showcase the particular and the local, but at the same time they manage to deconstruct the nostalgic impulse that would otherwise lock his vision into a dogmatic statement. Despite all the beauty and stylization, Kolski’s vernacularism self-consciously questions the localized with the historicized and the politicized. He avoids the elitism of the typical “small fatherland” construct by placing the identification subjects of his stories either on the margins of society or at the bottom of the class structure. With regard to communism, Kolski conflates humor with condemnation and thus manages to revalorize the issue of Polish complicity with this totalizing system.

---

<sup>28</sup> I am indebted to Elżbieta Ostrowska for this insight.

With rare exceptions, Kolski's movies are set in the same village scenery, maintain the same raw visual and rhetorical style, and present a cast of the same actors, who speak in a dialect that is truncated, repetitive, often melodic, and which usually breaks for extensive periods of silence (filled with the folklore-inspired music of Zygmunt Konieczny). There is a common iconography that brings all of the films into one semantic space. That space encompasses varied cultural codes, of which the most visible are nature, Christian hagiography, magic, science, history, and paganism. I believe that this idiosyncrasy of Kolski's microcosm happens to be its most appealing aspect, but at the same time it is responsible for the fact that Kolski's films remain obscure for Western audiences. After seeing a retrospective of Kolski's art at the Cambridge Film Festival, Tim Scott argues that "the lack of reference to Polish history [...] and eschewal of political focus is striking for a director born in 1956, and growing up under Communist rule. The films may contain obliquely historical metaphors – the personality cult of Johnny as a saint amongst the peasants in *Johnny the Aquarius* – but politics beyond the domestic sphere seems to interest Kolski little" (1-2). But it is precisely the politics and history *within* the domestic realm that receive the most remarkable treatment in the director's creative endeavor. And if indeed there is an emphasis on historical metaphors, I will argue that this is so not because Kolski wants to circumvent history, but rather because he is more interested in the individual production and consumption of historical meaning. His attempt is to traverse the distance between history and the "ownership" of the meaning of history.

One way to accomplish this taming of history is to focus the lens on the interiority of place as a space where history accumulates over time. In *The Lure of the Local: Senses*

of *Place in a Multicultural Society*, Lucy Lippard explains how place is built from space (the latter term defined by geographers as the abstract realm of scientific discourse, before the human web of signification is laid out) through absorption of historical meaning:

Most often place applies to our own “local” – entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke. Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there. (7)

Kolski presents the site of “where it all happened” in terms of enduring and surviving history. Kolski’s place is the great equalizer of historical change, absorbing events but also covering over many of them. His version of East Central Europe discloses the controversial, but often necessary, process of the interment of history. In slow motion, he presents the moment of time saturating space, but also space altering time. By showing how the local resists the outside movement, Kolski expresses one, perhaps the most important, characteristic of his part of Europe: its people derive meaning of their place in the world from watching the outside forces, along with their foreign power relations, enter and become yet another layer of ideological sedimentation, another minor inflection in their geography.

One of the most compelling features of the cinema of Jan Jakub Kolski is its consistent *mise en scène*. His stories unfold in a place that remains the same from film to

film. The topography makes one think of the Polish countryside of the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, upon further inspection, one realizes that it is a place set apart from the Polish village as we know it. For over a decade now, one carefully crafted scene after another, Kolski has been systematically constructing a celluloid place that attracts audiences with a mixture of seemingly incompatible elements clustered together to evoke a feeling of recognition. What we recognize in Kolski's place is a blend of reality bites, which, when placed side by side, represent the sense of place dominant among the inhabitants of East Central Europe. What does this sense consist of? And how does it derive from the physical reality?

The contradictions that comprise Kolski's world unsettle the idea of Eastern Europe invented in the West. Kolski imbues his place with literal and tangible provincialism, thus alluding to the Western invention of the "shadowed lands of backwardness." This type of ironic engagement with the dominant stereotype of Eastern Europe as the armpit of the European culture has been utilized in recent commercial cinema by Sacha Baron Cohen in his popular comedy *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006). In *Borat*, it is the nation of Kazakhstan (geographically part of Central Asia, not Europe) that embodies the idea of Eastern Europe, somehow still conflated with the former Soviet Union, as the territory of permanent economic and cultural retardation, where people share their hovels with domestic animals, drink themselves into oblivion, and remain awestruck by the technological miracle of a TV set.

Cohen paints Eastern Europe with such exaggerated brush strokes (e.g. his Kazakh characters speak Polish instead of their native language) that the stereotype

explodes in the salvos of the audience's hysterical laughter. But while Cohen's parody uses the stereotype of the retarded Eastern Europe to expose the ridiculousness of the construct, it also reaffirms it, simply because no alternative vision is being offered, and the only consistent cultural matrix of reference is the absurd thing being parodied. Kolski taps into the same stereotype, but instead of laughing it off, he refashions it to deliver a more accurate and productive version of the East Central European provincialism. This provincialism, a bottom-up project, has been under way even before the West began its dissemination of the Enlightenment ideology. More importantly, it exists in a variety of cultural contexts as a source of resistance to Western expansion. Dipesh Chakrabarty uses the figure of the peasant as the embodiment of this kind of provincialism: "The 'peasant' acts here as a shorthand for all the seemingly nonmodern, rural, nonsecular relationships and life practices that constantly leave their imprint on the lives of even the elites in India and on their institutions of government. The peasant stands for all that is not bourgeois (in a European sense) in Indian capitalism and modernity" (11).

Ultimately Kolski's aesthetics relies on a self-conscious rhetorical gesture that re-appropriates the main discursive tropes of the Western invention of Eastern Europe and is then used to reclaim the identity of East Central Europe for the project of self-representation. The attraction of his cinema lies in the fact that, with every new film, Kolski reiterates and elaborates for his viewer the portrait of a provincial place that is filled with shadow but is not at all backward. His films collectively provide a consistent and complex vision, which serves the purpose of a minor narrative for a minor people, living in a minor Europe.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the appeal of this minor grand narrative rests in

---

<sup>29</sup> I use "minor" here following in the footsteps of Deleuze and Guattari's literary interpretation as well as Dipesh Chakrabarty's historical analysis. Chakrabarty summarizes both meanings as follows: "Just as the

Kolski's brave coming to terms with the region's awareness of its provincial status. Provincialism remains a category of inferior identity (as an *unfortunate* condition of being left behind by the agents of civilization) for only as long as it is spoken about by those who use this label to chisel out the civilized core. In the process of sculpting this core the chips and the dust that fall off to the ground can be either swept away or saved for another project. In Kolski's hands, the byproduct of building Europe retains its history as discarded matter, but more importantly it is reused for a new creation that gains value of its own.

To best describe Kolski's cinematic world, I borrow the language of another contemporary artist engaged in the project of East Central European self-representation: Andrzej Stasiuk. In his book, *Traveling to Babadag* (2005), Stasiuk delivers an account of this Europe's marginal identity through one traveler's experience of small towns and villages in Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Moldova and Albania. Much like Kolski's films, this narrative heavily emphasizes the place itself. Here, characters and actions are completely under the spell of the landscape and local geography. The main concern of Stasiuk's storytelling is the peculiar influence that material reality has on the mind of the inhabitant of this part of Europe:

But on my way, I forget where I was going. As soon as I get off the main road, I'm seized by the feeling that the space surrounding me is becoming thicker and intractable, that it barely tolerates these homes, farmhouses, these miserable possessions behind fences, all that, which hardly rose off the

---

'minor' in literature implies 'a critique of narratives of identity' and refuses 'to represent the attainment of autonomous subjectivity that is the ultimate aim of the major narrative,' the 'minor' in my use similarly functions to cast doubt on the 'major.' For me, it describes relationships to the past that the 'rationality' of the historian's methods necessarily makes 'minor' or 'inferior,' as something 'nonrational' in the course of, and as a result of, its own operation" (101).



ground, hardly emerged above the surface, and is still trying to survive. But it all endures from day to day as if devoid of hope, as if only fatalism kept it all together. Concrete, brick, steel and wood are mixed together in accidental proportions, as if growth and decline could not, once and for all, settle the argument. The old looks dilapidated, deserted, resigned and helpless; the new is arrogant and lewd, using ostentation to kill the humiliation of the past and the fear of what is to come. Nothing but the here and now, the makeshift, the present tense continuously completing itself. Everything could disappear any moment, and the space would accept it, patch up, immediately smooth over, as if nothing happened. Because it all looks like a preface to something that will never begin, like the fringes without the center, like the periphery stretching to the very horizon without the culmination of a city. Yes, the landscape will swallow it, the space will be sewn back together, because the existence of these places, these boondocks, which I pass through and desperately love, exhausts itself in the very act of being, because their sense exhausts itself in its attempt to survive. In that way they are so much like nature that on a foggy winter day they are almost indistinguishable from the land. (249, my translation)

Kolski's *mise en scène* visually replicates the sense of place defined here so scrupulously by Stasiuk. The rural locations used in his films are far from picturesque pastoral vistas. They always seem a bit forsaken, a bit used up and always already in some aimless transition. They are a periphery completely unaware of the center and totally caught up in the basic process of becoming. The fact that Kolski always shoots on location, using actual Polish villages as his sets, reinforces the authenticity of his vision. But, like

Stasiuk, he transforms the encountered reality with his camera to express the complex amalgamation of feelings that rise in the mind and heart of the person destined to call this reality home.

The success of his vision depends on his ability to disclose all of the inadequacies, blemishes and flaws of this unimportant, even anachronistic, part of Europe, without eliciting in his viewers shame, anger or disappointment. On the contrary, through a masterful depiction of raw material reality and the ensuing deceleration of action, Kolski uses his camera as a discerning but loving eye, very different from the typical cinematic apparatus guided by vicarious drives to possess, regulate and consume.<sup>30</sup> As a result of Kolski's contemplative mode, the viewing subject, who, according to Jean-Louis Baudry, is always a function of the ideological work of the apparatus, maintains a reciprocal relationship with the reality on screen, best defined as *invested detachment*. That relationship, between Kolski's spectator and his cinematic reality, reproduces the sense of place experienced by East Central Europeans in response to their geo-historical circumstances. This stance could be summarized as trying to deflect the horizontal tug of war between the East and the West in order not to feel *out of place* in the home that is East Central Europe. The inhabitant of this Europe has learned to be deeply invested in the immediate physical surroundings, yet detached from the flux of global forces of domination. In the case of Kolski's spectator, this stance translates

---

<sup>30</sup> The concept of the cinematic apparatus, as theorized by Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, refers to "the totality of interdependent operations that make up the cinema-viewing situation, including (1) the technical base (specific effects produced by the various components of the film equipment, including camera, lights, film and projector); (2) the conditions of film projection (the darkened theater, the immobility implied by the seating, the illuminated screen in front, and the light beam projected from behind the spectator's head); (3) the film itself, as a 'text' (involving various devices to represent visual continuity, the illusion of real space, and the creation of a believable impression of reality); and (4) that 'mental machinery' of the spectator (including conscious perceptual as well as unconscious and preconscious processes) that constitutes the viewer as subject of desire" (*New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* 143).

into something akin to Kristevan space of semiotic chora, where the spectator engages with the audio-visual rhythms and intonations, and not the symbolic progress of the narrative. In that respect, Kolski's cinema is also about the challenge to the phallogentric mode of representation.

Before proceeding to analyze the role of Kolski's art in the project of East Central European self-representation, one needs to pause and review the history of the dominant discourse of imagining the region as the constitutive other of Western Europe: the barbaric East. Not surprisingly, this discourse was formulated by the Western outsider during the time when the ideas of development and backwardness became the key categories in appraising different cultures.

Arguably the most renowned East Central European to date, Copernicus (Mikołaj Kopernik) has been championed for formulating what came to be recognized as one of the most important scientific hypotheses in the history of human kind—the heliocentric theory of the solar system, thus propelling modern science, the paradigm behind the Western idea of progress, into existence against dogmatic thought of all kind (especially the Roman Catholic Church doctrine). A Renaissance man and a member of the clergy himself, he contributed to the general confidence in human intellect, its powers of observation and logical reasoning. But another way of looking at the Copernican Revolution is to see it as the ultimate move that deprived the Earth and its inhabitants of their central position in the universe. Although the theory that the Earth revolves around the Sun was first put forth by the Greek astronomer Aristarchus of Samos (ignored to the advantage of Ptolemy), it was Copernicus who declared that the Earth is a small and insignificant element in the complex entirety of the universe. At the time when Columbus

was helping the Western man to strengthen his foothold in the increasingly better charted and knowable world, Copernicus' theory initiated the earth-shaking dispersal of a given individual's privileged position in space and time. This realization along with the affective reverberations accompanying the epistemological degradation – a push to the margins of the known -- constitute the underpinnings of modern science; those shadows are the humbling counterpart of modern science.

While Western Europe focused on and greatly benefited from expanding its empire of knowledge, East Central Europe represented and labored over the simultaneous expansion of the necessary discourse of difference: the permanently gray cultural zone whose immediate vicinity still enables Western Europe to outline its modern contour. From Shakespeare's imaginary lands of Bohemia to the recent depiction of the region in nature documentary *Winged Migrations* (2001), Western European vision of East Central Europe has been shrouded in impenetrable gray mist; over time the dark fog of barbaric woodlands evolved into the noxious smog of polluted (ex)Soviet satellite countries. This hazy visual representation continues to impress conceptual obscurity onto ambiguous but not inscrutable cultural identity. As Foucault observed, "Western culture has constituted, under the name of man, a being who, by one and the same interplay of reasons, must be a positive domain of *knowledge* and cannot be an object of *science*" (366-367). The hidden, constitutive part of this Western logic rests within the immediate outside of the "positive domain of knowledge" – the territory that is barely visible because it is the demarcating line itself. For Western Europe that "immediate outside" where the object of science suddenly materialized, the place where the subject whittles itself out of the object, has been the stretch of land that separates Europe from Asia (historically from the Ottoman

and the Russian Empires that embodied the cultural concept of the Orient). That stretch of land has been safeguarding the standards of “civilization” ever since the great (and lesser) minds of the Enlightenment summoned the place into existence under the banner of “Eastern Europe.”

Voltaire, like many Western Europeans of his time, saw Eastern Europe in need of discipline and domination (either on the part of Catherine the Great or Charles XII).<sup>31</sup> Painted as a land of anarchy, inhabited by the barbaric hords prone to violence, superstition, irrational passions – the people who according to Casanova possessed “souls of slaves” (121), Eastern Europe remains an imaginary location employed as the horizon of the strategic gaze of the European subject, directed from west to east, from progress to chaos. In his extended correspondence with Catherine II, Voltaire repeatedly encouraged the Russian monarch to “unscramble” the mosaic of small nations littering the space between Western Europe and Catherine’s empire. He advised her to use her “genius” to disentangle “all this chaos in which the earth is plunged, from Danzig to the mouth of the Danube” (181). In that sense, Eastern Europe of the Enlightenment (along with Peter’s beardless, Europeanized Russia) was made to function as a dividing screen, permeable only in one direction: radiating Western culture over the steppes and deserts of the continental Orient.

Another formidable voice of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, considered Eastern Europe worthy of theoretical consideration, but like Voltaire he declined the local sovereigns’ invitations to visit the region, and instead proceeded to

---

<sup>31</sup> For archive-based, detailed analysis of the Enlightenment’s preoccupation with, and creation of, Eastern Europe, see Larry Wolff’s *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Wolf offers a convincing argument that traces the iron curtain’s separating curve back to the eighteenth century’s political, economic, and most of all imaginary divisions between Europe and Asia.

theorize on the political, economic, and cultural possibilities of Eastern Europe on the basis of his imaginary vision of it. He politely turned down Catherine's invitation to come and live on a pastoral estate near St. Petersburg, saying that he would visit Russia only if he were younger and Russia were "closer to the sun" (Richardson 403). The imaginary Eastern Europe of the era was constructed through a series of fictional travelogues written by Western authors who either invented Eastern Europe as a dramatic setting (often a substitute for the Orient proper) for their fictional travelers, or invented Eastern European travelers, who ventured out into the West, only to attest to the utmost inferiority of their native cultures. Among the most famous of those accounts are *Polish Letters* by Jean-Paul Marat (1770s) and *The Travels and Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1785) by Rudolf Erich Raspe. The culmination of those voyages of fantasy was Catherine II's trip from St. Petersburg to the Crimea in 1787. Accompanied by Western ambassadors, she witnessed from her boat a grand spectacle prepared for her guests (and the international press community of the time) by her general field marshal Grigori Aleksanrovich Potemkin. The riverfront along the Dniepr was transformed into a stage to a dizzying variety of tableaux depicting pastoral scenes straight from Rousseau's *The New Heloise* and others as if lifted from the rococo court of Madame Pompadour. The Western ambassadors admired the illusion, but at the same time they remained undeceived: civilization in Eastern Europe could only be an imitation (even if it was a dazzling performance).

Similar to Jaucourt's account on Eastern European countries in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie: ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des*

*métiers*,<sup>32</sup> Rousseau sought the region's identity in its abundant natural riches and admonished its people to invest more effort into agriculture, without wasting their time on other aspects of human industry (e.g. trade, finance, goods manufacture). Through this rhetorical move, Rousseau both idealized the territory of Eastern Europe (in the spirit of sentimentalism) and, perhaps unwittingly,<sup>33</sup> contributed to the exploitative economic ideology deployed by Western Europe against its eastern neighbor. From Prussian and Austro-Hungarian Empires using Eastern Europe as their granary to Hitler's planned policy of economic exploitation of the region under Nazi occupation,<sup>34</sup> the relationship of the two Europes has been that of colonization, often paired with military occupation, and orientalism.

Although an imaginary construct, Kolski's village stands in contrast to Potemkin's romanticized creations. It is also far from the idealized settlement that Raymond Williams identified in his study of the cultural tension between the country and the city. The idealization of settlement, Williams argues in his Marxist critique of agrarian capitalism, began as a strategy of regulating the landless population in the countryside. The myth of the land flowing with milk and honey standing in opposition to

---

<sup>32</sup> Jaucourt focused on the region's natural resources and presented this slice of European land as potentially enriching but at the same time ruled and inhabited by people unable to manage their own land. He criticized Poland for its lack of economic ambition: "Nature has put in this state all that is needed to live, grains, honey, wax, fish, game; and all that is needed to become rich, grains, pastures, livestock, wools, leathers, salt mines, metals, minerals; however Europe has no poorer people" (as quoted in Wolff 188).

<sup>33</sup> Rousseau took the side of Poland in the debate with Voltaire over Poland's right for independence, which accompanied the political crisis that culminated in Partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, and 1795). While Voltaire saw in Eastern Europe nothing but chaos and desert, Rousseau, in his *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, judged this state perfectly deserving of self-government.

<sup>34</sup> In 1939, one of the senior Nazi officials, Hans Frank was made Governor General of the occupied Polish territory. In an interview that took place on October 3, 1939, he described the policy which he intended to put into effect by stating: "Poland shall be treated like a colony; the Poles will become the slaves of the Greater German World Empire" (*Nuremberg Trial Proceedings*, Volume 3; document EC-344.16). His Government General proceeded to ship all the food raised in Poland to Germany, causing mass starvation of local population.

the corrupt city, according to Williams, was appropriated by the small landowning population to idealize their access to the means of production and, at the same time, used to put into question those without a legitimate connection to the land (as consumers, producers, or wage labor). Here, Williams lists “the dispossessed and the vagrants, and the old, the sick, the disabled, the nursing mothers, the children who, unable to work in these terms, were seen as merely negative, an unwanted burden” (82).

Kolski’s place is heavily populated with the “unwanted burden.” Amongst his characters, most of them severely humbled by life, we meet Hanutka, the village whore; the pregnant and abandoned Veronka; the fun-loving waitress Grażynka, who one day receives the stigmata; a pair of circus freaks in love: Janka and Morka; the legless Kulawik, who roams the countryside planted on a wooden cart that serves as his makeshift wheelchair; the infertile Pograbek, who kills old horses for a living; and the amateur violinist Lunda, who reads music off the decorative patterns found on broken plates. These characters, in their lack of the ownership connection to the land, or to any property for that matter, remind one of the inhabitants of the city ghetto. Their cinematic presence blurs the dichotomy discussed by Williams and reminds the viewer of the complex nature of the East Central European countryside, which included a pronounced role of the Jewish shtetl: a semi-rural community based on farming but not on land ownership, a place where the dispossessed and the minimally “in-possession” lived. For centuries, the shtetl population managed to preserve their traditional and unique modes of life precisely by circumventing both the agricultural exploitation and its industrial equivalent.



Many of Kolski's characters are losers who are ready to receive each other to form an awkward but comfortable community. Some of them, like Johnny the Aquarius or the young Andryszek, are single-mindedly pursuing their dreams. Others, like Veronka or Morka, are happy to be witnesses to other people's dreams. In fact, the quiet witnesses form the majority of residents in Kolski's universe. Between the hotheaded visionaries and the mild-mannered, enduring populace, there are very few characters that could be seen living productive and ambitious lives, at least not according to the capitalist or the communist vision of a productive existence. Work, in the form of either private enrichment (self-improvement) or the communal labor, is simply missing from Kolski's vision.

Yet, despite the general lack of aspiration and commerce, the viewer gets a clear impression that the characters are living meaningful lives, and that an important part of that meaning stems from the simple, yet subtle, bond that these people maintain with the place they occupy. As Edward Casey once wrote, "To live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the place one is in" (18). It is apparent that Kolski is not afraid to send out the message about the importance of primal sense of place in the era of global time-space compression and increasing uprootedness among world's population. In the face of increasingly dislocated and interrupted life patterns, those who speak of the benefits of attachment to a particular place risk sounding reactionary and exclusionary. However, against some such accusations, Kolski's message is not employed in the service of ethnic rootedness and nationalism, two modes of relating to place that received severe criticism in recent years among philosophers of place.

Much of Kolski's most devoted audience is to be found among the young generations of Poles, who for various reasons are not able to leave the country to make a living abroad and thus must eke out a living at home, more often than not, unemployed. They do not participate in the time-space compression of the global market economy. More accurately, one should imagine these people's lives as decompressed and decelerated. A day in a life of a chronically unemployed person living in an economically depressed area deepens the space and stretches the time, sometimes to a painful extent. So the lack of characters engaged in systematized labor in Kolski's universe does not stem from a desire to depict land as perpetually fertile, thus substituting a pastoral idyll to mask over exploitative economic relations behind the prosperous enterprise of agricultural capitalism, as Raymond Williams would have it. Kolski's characters do not work NOT because they are graced with prelapsarian innocence – a construct of cultural and artistic sublimation of actual rural exploitation, but because there is no work to be done. If one was tempted to conduct a Marxist reading of Kolski's cinematic countryside, it would have to begin with facing the economic reality of the region. The following are the key features of East Central European economies today: reliance on pre-modern subsistence farming (low productivity, low capital endowment and low competitiveness), 15-20% unemployment resulting from the dissolution of communist, government-subsidized heavy industries, harvesting of non-timber forest products (mushroom and berry picking, fishing, hunting and trapping) as the most popular solution to the problem of unemployment.

There is an emblematic scene in *The Burial of a Potato* that ridicules the very idea of land ownership, both as means of capitalizing and as a source of some essential

heritage. The film's dramatic action is centered on the agricultural land reform initiated in Poland by the Communists in the years immediately following WWII, when large, private estates were confiscated from the Polish nobility to be parceled and handed over to local peasants, estate servants and party members. One Stefan Gorzelak is the antagonist in the story: a cruel, greedy man who will stop at nothing to own a bigger piece of land than what the state has assigned to him. As his scheming to exclude a returning war victim, fellow villager, from his due share of land intensifies, Gorzelak's lust for land turns literal on screen, and we see him fall to the ground and frantically inseminate earth.

The scene is most likely a phantasm in Gorzelak's inflamed imagination. But regardless of its status within the film's narrative, the viewer is convinced that Gorzelak is precisely the kind of man who would want to physically penetrate the plot of land that came into his possession. Kolski constructs the scene as a pathetic reenactment of the regressive search for internalized origins, the origins that Gorzelak is so desperate to acquire, because he is a singular, unattached nobody. Throughout the film, Gorzelak is portrayed as a despicable character who mistreats animals, women, and is responsible for a death of a wounded soldier, whom he refuses to help. He has no love or friendship ties with anybody in his community and has no apparent skill or profession. He seems to believe that the land grant will finally elevate his position in society, but the viewer witnesses Gorzelak's utter degradation.

The scene in question begins with Gorzelak entering a freshly ploughed field. As he is walking in the folds of the field, a crosscutting sequence alternates between a camera focusing on Gorzelak's body from waist down and an even row of naked male

bodies, also seen only from waist down, that seem to be walking down the same field. The low camera angle suggests a viewing perspective from the ground itself, therefore animating the receiving subject of the act that is about to happen. Gorzelak first falls to his knees to fill his fists with soil. This shot, in itself an echo of a recurrent cinematic topos of the human gratitude for one's place in the world, is then evacuated from the usual context and thrust into what can only be described as a grotesque imitation of a rape scene. Gorzelak hurriedly digs a whole in the ground, lowers his pants and throws his pelvis into it. At this point the camera suddenly takes flight and gradually assumes a bird's-eye perspective. From a growing distance, we see Gorzelak's body move rhythmically against the ground, performing this bizarre intercourse. Eventually, Gorzelak is a tiny speck of dirt against the overwhelming expanse of land. What began as a menacing imitation of rape has been transformed into a laughable farce. The field of vision in which the scene culminates allows the viewer to see Gorzelak's aspiration of domination as a pitiful act of territorial onanism.

Furthermore, the scene functions as a way to activate the issue of gender with regard to landownership. Showing Gorzelak grabbing and raping the land is a reenactment of an earlier, much more disturbing, scene in the film, that of an actual rape of a woman. The woman violated is the daughter of a local aristocrat/ landowner who, along with the rest of his family, was murdered by the Soviet soldiers who "liberated" Poland in 1944. The daughter is the only survivor of the bloody massacre. Deeply traumatized by what happened to her family, she barely holds on to her sanity. Gorzelak uses her as a ploy in his scheme to secure more land. He invites the land surveyor, whose job it is to parcel out the large estate, to the plundered manor house where the woman's

family used to reside and she continues to live. The men drink excessively and then proceed to assault the vulnerable woman. She resists and is subsequently beaten by Gorzelak, who then throws her unconscious body on the table for the land surveyor's pleasure. The two scenes of rape are bridged by Gorzelak's role as the perpetrator of violence and the fact that they code landownership in the language of paternal heritage. As a part of Kolski's critique of this language, we are invited to see no qualitative difference in the system of land distribution before and after the communist reform, both are based on usurpation of power and violence embedded in patriarchy. The two scenes differ, however, in the affect they elicit in the viewer. While the rape of the aristocrat's daughter is extremely painful to witness (one might even turn away from the screen in horror), the rape of the land evokes scorn with a dose of amusement. Kolski, thus, brings to our attention a number of observations: there is aggression involved in human affairs no matter what the ruling political system is; the persistence of suffering that we inflict upon each other is the greatest injustice, which nature cannot equalize; the violence exacted by humans upon nature is often an extension of the dominant social ties.

Kolski shows how the notion of controlling land is a mad undertaking. There can be no such thing as a possession of place. Place must arise not through exercise of power but rather an exercise of mindful cultivation of connections. In his seminal text on the idea of place, *Topophilia*, Yi-Fu Tuan explains how human life unfolds through the experience of surroundings and the "affective bond between people and place" (4). Kolski puts significant effort in showing his viewer the difference between the bare fact of inhabiting a section of physical space and the place as a field of guardianship, of prudent care and attentiveness. The character of Gorzelak embodies the drive to inhabit

the space and mold it in the owner's image. But most of Kolski's characters engage with their place through the practice of mindful tending. We see these people partake in ritual-like repetition of some basic exchanges with the elements of their immediate environment (actions usually omitted in cinema): watering plants, sweeping the front yard, cooking, eating, feeding birds, caring for animals, but also talking to trees and observing the rhythms of nature. Most of this daily maintenance is performed in silence, and rather than providing the "filler" for more important events, these rituals of caring take the center stage of the film. In this regard, Kolski's cinema offers an antidote to commercial cinema that operates through the sense of space rather than place. Kolski's world is minimally kinetic, which allows him to interrupt space, defined by Tuan as an arena of action and movement, and build a sense of place, a moment of stopping and becoming drawn into the surroundings. The fact that Kolski is laboring against the key principle of his medium – motion – and still capturing the viewer's attention is a testament to his creative imagination and extraordinary inventiveness in the realm of film form. Combined, the two ingredients result in cinema enchanted – stopped in its tracks -- with the local.

East Central Europe has never rid itself of this pre-modern enchantment, which I like to call primary, or even primal, enchantment. This mode of viewing the world comes from being loyal to one's place in the world, the small plot of land that continues to bear fruit and provide shelter against all historical odds. The sweeping horizontal upheavals of modern history, along with exploitative economic policies implemented by the outside imperial centers, taught East Central Europeans to assume a humbling, if at times territorial, attitude of looking after one's immediate surroundings, one's own backyard.

The statistics support the enormous scale of this spell of gravity.<sup>35</sup> East Central Europe of the twenty-first century still relies mostly on agrarian economy, which curiously resists industrial agriculture (which the EU, today, and the Soviet Union, in the past, failed to implement). Subsistence farming, which stresses land stewardship and not productivity, is the dominant model of land cultivation in the area. The phenomenon of mass community gardens repeatedly stalls urban developers' ventures across the region. Most urban dwellers own tiny plots of land that sprawl just outside of city borders, which are used as gardens and places of weekend recreation. These settlements have nothing in common with the usual summer houses owned by the more successful members of the middle class. Typically these "allotments" consist of a few square meters of land transformed into a vegetable and flower garden, with a tool shed occupying the central spot. Subsistence farms and community gardens are a symptom of the colonial experience endured at some point by most East Central European nations. They attest to the need for a particular attachment to physical place, the precious strip of land dividing the East from the West. This antemural territory, raped and pillaged repeatedly by the hegemonies on both sides of the divide, derives much of its identity from preserving the cosmic bond between the human being and Earth.

In Kolski's films the link that connects the human with cosmos is the animal. Kolski's characters always take good care of their animals, treating them with utter respect, without, however, confusing this respect with the love reserved for another human being. When this delicate harmony between people and their beasts gets disrupted by gratuitous violence in *Johnny the Aquarius*, the community has to pay the price. The

---

<sup>35</sup> Anyone who has ever traveled through East Central Europe must have noticed that gravity affects the people there much more than the inhabitants of the rest of Europe. People's faces are drawn, looks cast downwards, and body postures never assuming complete vertical position.

film opens with a touching scene in which a village vagabond finds an old mare on the side of the road. This poor man, who has been pulling a cart filled with his meager belongings by the strength of his own back, is now overflowing with happiness. Vagabond (the character refers to himself as such) slowly approaches the horse, while talking to it in the most endearing terms: “Horsey, whose are you? Come here, come here. I think I might have a horse. Come here, godly little creature.” He then caresses the horse’s muzzle, runs his hand through its mane, but suddenly he realizes that the horse is in a very bad way. As soon as Vagabond turns away to go and get something from his cart (presumably something that would relieve the horse’s suffering), the mare collapses on its side. Vagabond runs up to the animal, only to witness its quick death. While crying and petting the horse’s body, Vagabond is outraged to discover that someone must have beaten the old horse and sent it away to die. Vagabond buries the animal. Disgusted with the cruel act perpetrated against a defenseless creature, he places a curse on the village, wishing a devil to be born amongst the villagers.

The mixture of heartfelt emotions (joy, sadness and anger) expressed by Vagabond, the character who, like the old mare, represents otherness expelled by the village, elicits compassion in the viewer. The scene contains the most intimate dramatization of an animal’s death, portraying the event as a fundamental and deeply unnecessary loss. After Vagabond’s pronouncement of the curse, during which the camera pans across the landscape menacingly, the viewer feels that the world will never be the same. This unforgettable and devastating scene animates an important aspect of East Central European *Weltanschauung*: the animals are viewed as fellow witnesses in the effort for survival, not as means of agricultural production only. Their use value for



the human is only partially based on pure consumption value. Their physical presence, good health, and comfort constitute another tissue of the place as a field of care. Once again I borrow from the beautiful prose of Andrzej Stasiuk in hope of finding a proper translation for Kolski's intense images:

Yes, my Europe is full of animals. Huge pigs rolling in mud by the side of the road, somewhere between Tiszaörs and Nagyiván, dogs at sidewalk cafes of Bucharest, buffalos in Rășinari, horses let loose in Carnohora. I wake up at five in the morning to the chime of sheep bells. It's raining and the mooing of cows sounds muffled, flattened, it doesn't resound with an echo. I once asked a woman why she was keeping so many cows if nobody was there to buy the milk. "What do you mean, why?" she answered as if she did not understand the question. "One has to keep them." It simply would not cross her mind to break this archaic bond between the human and the animal. "What kind of people are you, if you don't have animals." This was the sense of her response, which contained the fear of human isolation. The animal is the missing link, which ties us with the rest of the world. (85, my translation)

In terms of identity construction on screen, these ubiquitous animals are "kept" not as mirror images of their owners, upon which human rights are thus conferred, but rather as the embodiment of the other whose presence in close vicinity carries an ontological meaning. Any and every version of humanity arises through the practice of othering. While in some instances the impulse is to cover over this often violent cognitive practice of essentialist self-aggrandizement, in Kolski's world the silent presence of the first

human other, the animal, works as an ethics of intervention.<sup>36</sup> It works through illuminating the axis of animal-human differentiation in order to slow down the very act of separating humanity from that which is not human. Constructing extensive screen co-existence for both products of this differentiation, Kolski infinitely suspends the final and most dangerous stage of othering: the masking over the internal fissures of that which is being defined in the process.

Just as the relationship of humans with animals is based on symbiosis, Kolski's portrayal of the peasants' attitudes towards the crops they are supposed to grow emphasizes anti-modern conception of the fruit of the land. In *The Saber from the Commander* (1995) modern industrial agriculture receives a satirical dismissal. One of the main characters is an agricultural botanist, Janeczek, whose ambition is to grow healthier and hardier varieties of fruit in his father's orchard. Janeczek is the educated farmer with his own field laboratory. While Janeczek is performing his bio-experiments, his father is growing huge apples simply by fertilizing the apple tree with his own excrement. He has built an outhouse in the orchard and is lovingly enriching the soil every morning. Meanwhile, Janeczek's experiments are compared to the pseudo-science of Trofim Lysenko and Ivan Michurin, two controversial figures in the history of Soviet agriculture. For decades, throughout the East Central European territory, these two figures have been associated with the Soviet effort to industrialize small-scale farming. This effort was successfully sabotaged in most of the countries of the Soviet block, but it irreversibly ruined agriculture across the Russian countryside. Stalin's idea of

---

<sup>36</sup> Carol Adams in her feminist critique of the western modes of food consumption uses the term "absent referent" for the conceptual erasure of the vitalist idea of the animal that drives mass meat production and consumption. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams argues that patriarchy is continually reinforced through perverse human/animal relations. Those relations, in turn, inflect the treatment of women and the ethnic other.

modernizing farming encompassed three disastrous programs: the collectivization of farms, the exile to Siberia of ten million most successful private farmers, and the confiscation of all available grain, including all of the seed stock (resulting in the virtual disappearance of native grain varieties). Trofim Lysenko was one of Stalin's agents authorized to facilitate the process of building the farming industry in the Soviet Union. Instead, after infiltrating the community of geneticists and sending the most progressive ones to gulags, Lysenko put in place a series of failing farming practices based on his own dubious science of biology, which was based on Lamarckism and Darwinism.

In Kolski's film, Lysenkoism stands for the botched attempt to industrialize agriculture in Poland. It also functions as a gross caricature of land cultivation. Not unlike communism, Lysenkoism became an absurd episode in contemporary history, best dealt with as a great source of humor. One of the characters retells the popular old joke about Michurin: "Do you know how Michurin's wife died? ... She fell off a strawberry." The joke is pushed even further when human-size fruit materializes on screen. The fruit are props that Janeczek's father uses to draw his son's attention to women and the need to start a family. The father and his village buddies place the fake fruit in the garden of the woman they believe would make a great wife for Janeczek, in order to lure Janeczek out of his orchard and into the woman's bedroom. Janeczek's father needs a grandson to pass on to him his most cherished possession, the saber from Commander Piłsudski who led the Polish troops against Russian invaders during the 1920 war. Here, Kolski pokes fun at Polish patriotism. The old man's single-minded drive to produce an heir becomes equated with Lysenko's ruse to build the most successful agricultural industry in the world. Both projects are doomed because they rely on enforced breeding. Nature cannot and should

not be exploited for the benefit of a few men with highfalutin ideas, Kolski seems to be saying. As the comedy intensifies, the father's scheme backfires: Janeczek breeds huge pear-flavored plums that fall off the tree before they get a chance to ripen, and he becomes a father to a baby girl who gets to play with the sacred saber.

I disagree with those critics who claim that Kolski's popularity stems from the utopic strangeness of his cinematic universe. These critics accuse Kolski of being insular and a-historical despite the fact that his debut feature examines the difficult issues of post WWII anti-semitism and the controversy of the communist agrarian reforms, and all of his other films, in one way or another, confront the Polish national mythology. Ewa Mazierska, in her article that places Kolski's films within the tradition of magic realism, explains that Kolski's engagement with history derives its "ethnographic authenticity" from the combination of Polish history with the director's private history (1). She interprets Kolski's biographical interjections as a part of the director's plan to disrupt the coherence of the official history. Furthermore, Mazierska sees the coexistence of various historical epochs within one cinematic narrative (what she calls Kolski's "temporal mixture") as yet another strategy of disclosing history as a legitimizing, pseudo-scientific discourse, and not a transparent chronicle of the past (6).

The estrangement of history intertwined with the domesticated mystery of life (not to mention the director's declared love for the work of García Márquez) invite the critic to anchor Kolski's vision within the sensibility of magic realism. A number of artists from East Central Europe (such as Bruno Schulz, Isaac B. Singer, Milan Kundera, Jan Švankmajer or Olga Tokarczuk) have employed the style of what is now known as magic realism because this stylistic mode best corresponds to the experience of their

complex socio-economic and cultural milieu. The style of magic realism helps these artists to alter the ideological perspective from which they are forced to create. My claim is that magic realism has been successfully utilized to preserve the tension between the literary and the historical by artists who often are accused of having withdrawn into the realm of the unbelievable, solely as means of escape from the turbulent history of the region, of having fled into the glossy world of nostalgia that Frederic Jameson finds so hazardous in both modernism and postmodernism. Through the means of magic realism, these artists illustrate their communities' blend of the mundane with the arcane, the history with the indigenous chronicle.

At this point, it is important to stress that the latest studies in magic realism show that the term's genealogy leads us beyond Latin America of 1940's and 50's, back to the post-WWI Europe. In 1925, Franz Roh, the German art historian coined the term *Magischer Realismus* (magic realism) to characterize the new post-Expressionist direction in European painting that took artists away from Expressionism and abstract art back to Realism. There is evidence that shows that the term and the aesthetic of magic realism were then popularized among the members of literary circles.<sup>37</sup> After the traumas of World War I, in times of great political and economic instability, many abstract avant-garde artists felt a need to return to representational art—art of precision and objectivity.<sup>38</sup> However, the realism that those artists adopted was different from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Realism. In the words of Franz Roh, magic realism (also referred to as New

---

<sup>37</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, the editor and organizer for the magazine *900*, which was published in both Italian and French, popularized the term *realismo magico* in 1927 among European poets and writers.

<sup>38</sup> Irene Guenther who writes about magic realism in the Weimer Republic describes the pro-realist turn in the interwar period as follows: "It was an art that was firm in compositional structure and was, once again, representational. In reaction to Expressionism's apocalyptic visions, heated color palette, utopian message, and the shattering disillusionment which followed the war, this post-Expressionist art concerned itself with the tangible real, the familiar. After the emotional fervor of Expressionism, as well as the horrors of the war and subsequent German Revolution, artists searched for 'sobriety' and 'freedom from all sentimentality.'"

Objectivity) was to capture “[t]he clash of true reality and the apparent reality” (20). Roh believed that “[h]umanity seems destined to oscillate forever between devotion to the world of dreams and adherence to the world of reality” (17). Consequently, he found in magic realism a way to recuperate the objective world (somewhat obliterated by Expressionists and other modernists) in order to juxtapose it with its compulsive imitation, or impression, delivered by the human mind. This new kind of realism offered an insight into the nature of things by representing their “energetic intensity” (20); however, Roh emphasized, this elucidating crystallization of things is always aware of having been “produced artificially” (20), of having been wrestled from “the midst of general becoming, of universal dissolution” (22). In order to extend this dialectic to the subject of memory and history in Kolski’s work, one might say that magic realism abets his celluloid characters in the effort to remember a memory, while preserving its inherent fragility, and pointing out the “miracle of an apparent persistence and duration in the midst of a demoniacal flux” (Roh 22). In Kolski’s world, this “demoniacal flux” is the flux of history. The history of Poland has been demoniacal and at times only absurdly funny, which Kolski’s tragi-comic films so well illustrate.

Thus, when analyzing Kolski’s cinema within the magic realist framework, it is important to move beyond the usual association of magic realism with lyrical folk tales and aesthetic intoxication, and instead to focus on the subversive potential of this style. In “On Magic Realism in Film” (1986), Fredric Jameson sees magic realism as always

emerging from moments of socio-economic transitions and the accompanying coexistence of multiple representational codes.<sup>39</sup>

In his analysis of some Polish and Venezuelan cinema, Jameson points out that, on the surface, magic realist cinema is very similar to the so called nostalgia films. Both seem to pay a lot of attention to the material reality and both offer a concentration of the enthralling visual detail. But while the latter elicits from the viewer a consuming gaze (“a formal compensation for the enfeeblement of historicity in our own time”), the former engages the viewing subject with “the image in its present time,” and by doing so allows the viewer to encounter History – “in that case history with holes, perforated history, which includes gaps not immediately visible to us, so close is our gaze to its objects of perception” (303-304). I believe that the critical tendency to lock Kolski’s vision of the world within the limits of fantasy derives from Kolski’s pronounced style and his proclivity to experiment with the camera (often making the cinematic apparatus visible). Those critics who see Kolski’s work as sheer phantasmagoria ignore the obvious elements of his aesthetics that do not allow for nostalgic consumption, but rather twist the material reality out of its initial harmonious composition and throw it into harsh and often painful “being-as-becoming.”

One of the more memorable scenes where the camera alters the material reality into a site of real-life intensity, which has an almost metaphysical reference, takes place in *The Burial of a Potato*. Soon after the protagonist, Mateusz, returns from a concentration camp back to the village where he lived before WWII, he finds his family gone, his house ransacked and all his leather-craft tools stolen. The population of the

---

<sup>39</sup> The postcolonial critics (Linda Hutcheon, Stephen Slemon) have theorized magic realism as a powerful artistic strategy that is used to question and re-construct notions of historical memory and cultural inheritance. Arguably, it is possible to consider East Central Europe as a post-colonial territory.

village forsook Mateusz and looted his property when he was taken to the camp. After the war, when against all odds, Mateusz returns, the villagers start feeling guilty, and one by one give him back his belongings. The scenes that are most “magical” in the film involve Mateusz sitting in his empty house and trying his hand once again at leather craft, the occupation that he practiced before the Holocaust. During one of these scenes, the camera lingers between Mateusz’s large, very clumsy hands and his beautifully benign but traumatized face. Then it moves into a sequence of close ups of each tool that Mateusz is placing in a dusty drawer. At this point the narrative stops, and the viewer enters an ontological moment of becoming that one is prone to miss in the usual flux of life, but here the medium of cinema arrests that movement (despite the camera’s uninterrupted motion) to articulate Mateusz’s struggle between the horrifying past and the possibility of a future. The intensity of the image, the presentness of emotion, the mute obstinacy of the tools that survived the war unscathed, all make this shot magically real.

It is easy to ignore how Kolski’s uncanny style is actually working together with the content to build the world that has been neglected by cinema worldwide. Kolski uses cinema – the technology energized by the capitalist city – to tell the tales of rural communities. The conflict between the urban provenance of cinema and the need to employ this inherently metropolitan medium to represent the periphery lies at the center of Kolski’s project. In *The History of Cinema in Popielawy* (1998), Kolski re-imagines the origins of cinema and depicts the birth of the cinematic apparatus to have taken place in a Polish village, only then to be sold to the Lumière brothers. This careful self-referentiality seems to be employed by the director in a critical effort to disclose cinema as one mode of representation – the mode supremely equipped to enhance the work of



mimesis, but also the mode least conscious of the ideological slippage that accompanies the cinematic suture. In her analysis of the film, Ewa Mazierska focuses on this ambiguity of the medium: “[...] *The History of Cinema in Popielawy* is neither about simple remembering nor forgetting, but about their interplay, their dialectic. Similarly, cinema in Kolski’s film is both an agent of immortalizing and destroying history” (5).

Kolski’s emergence during the 90’s coincided with the time when Krzysztof Kieślowski’s career took an international turn -- the time when Kieślowski reached outside of Poland and made films co-produced with France: *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991) and *The Color Trilogy* (1993-94), the films that made Kieślowski internationally famous almost overnight. In these films, Kieślowski is mostly preoccupied with universal values. One might argue that Kieślowski was always preoccupied with these issues: love, life, mortality. But in his previous films, such as *The Camera Buff* (1979), *No End* (1985), *Decalogue* (1988-89), these issues were tightly woven into a very specific historical and political milieu of communist Poland. In the 90’s, Kieślowski moves away from the strictly Polish context and further universalizes his vision. I believe that it is significant that around that time, Kolski’s vernacularism gains immense popularity among Polish audiences, and surprisingly among the young moviegoers, who were by then somewhat tired of the grand tradition of the cinema of moral concern.

Kolski’s ever increasing popularity in Poland and Kieślowski’s recognition abroad is symptomatic of certain cultural shifts that were taking place in the 90’s. First, the ethos of the opposition fighter – a member of intelligentsia or the working class—had to be reevaluated since freedom had been won and the role of a political dissident made redundant. Second, history, which until 1989 seemed to be the most immediate force

shaping the contours of reality, lost its dramatic momentum and cleared the space for the story of the commonplace – the prosaic strife for happiness in a democratic but time-obsessed and alienating society.

Kolski is the main artist of the commonplace today. He purposely sets his films in the periphery, where politics (but not history) often functions as entertainment rather than a means of controlling people's conditions of life. It is politics, the monkey business of politics to be precise, that Kolski mocks – as in his *The Saber from the Commander*, where the director satirizes the ritual of listening to Radio Free Europe. In the film largely devoted to the issues of preserving the patriotic tradition, we see the protagonist, Jakubek, engage in a daily custom of listening to the underground radio station. On summer days, when the reception becomes quite clear, Jakubek needs to create a certain amount of “white noise” in his kitchen to imitate the Soviet authorities' jamming of the station. Otherwise this ritual would not be complete. He whips a chicken tied to his table to elicit the right level of interference. Listening to Radio Free Europe is now a familiar element of the national mythology surrounding the anti-communist opposition movement. Kolski demotes that mythology, but at the same time he uses the scene to show how a grandiose political discourse got incorporated into the folklore of this particular village family.

Another feature that makes Kolski's films prosaic and emphatically non-utopic is his placement of all sorts of social outcasts at the center of his narratives. Kolski's universe is peopled with village idiots, whores, ethnic minority members and the crippled. But this focus on the periphery and the human Other that occupies it does not make Kolski's films a-historical. On the contrary, these films expose both Catholicism and Marxism as ideologies that demonize God and History. In his films, Kolski replaces

the man-against-history with the man-through-history. In place of a lonely individual victimized by history, Kolski offers a picture of an intimate collectivity, whose members interpolate history (and religion) at the same time as they experience it. This representation of history as always renegotiated by its subjects makes Kolski's vision inherently optimistic: it shows a way out of resignation and cynicism of a human being excluded from history.

*Away from the Window* (2000) is perhaps the best example of this domestication of history that Kolski so powerfully creates on screen. The film tells a story of a childless Polish couple (Jan and Barbara) who decide to hide a Jewish woman (Regina) in their apartment to save her from the perils of the Holocaust. In the process, Jan and Regina fall in love and Regina becomes pregnant. She gives birth to her daughter, but the Polish woman, Barbara, who never managed to have her own child, takes Regina's child and brings it up as her own. In the end, the helpless Regina escapes the wooden wardrobe (the piece of furniture with multiple connotations in Polish cinema), but not the memories of her sad habitation in it. She leaves the people who saved her life but stole her child. In the final sequences of the film, about fifteen years after Regina's escape, we witness Jan and Barbara's unraveling marriage, and the daughter's investigation of her true origins. The investigation conducted by this young woman into her Polish-Jewish parentage leads the contemporary viewer of the film to ponder the difficult questions of the Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust. The wartime fate of this awkward family unit provides for a claustrophobic environment in which blood connections and extreme emotions force the characters to "assimilate" history.

One way in which Kolski conducts this process of “assimilation” is through collapsing the religious barrier between the Jewish Regina and her Catholic hosts. The dissolution of the barrier happens gradually and is most evident in the stylistic register of the film. The image that organizes that register happens to be Regina’s radiant face enveloped in darkness. This shot is purposely stylized to alienate her face, point out the dark vacuum of her solitude, and infuse the mother-to-be with the sense of mystery. Madonna-like close-ups of Regina’s face proliferate as her role in the household becomes simultaneously questionable and desirable. That image connects Regina with the Christian Madonna, and specifically with the painting that Jan (who is a painter) is not able to finish, and that Barbara prays to every night, asking for conception. In the painting, the figure of the baby Jesus is only outlined, but not filled in.

The painting keeps changing its meaning throughout the film. When we first see it, we immediately perceive it an image of Barbara’s infertility. Then, Regina takes the place of the Madonna in the painting, and Regina’s child, who will ultimately not be hers, takes the place of the absent baby Jesus. It is also possible to see Regina as the absent child, especially in the scenes that show Barbara taking care of Regina, when she is sick during pregnancy, or simply, in Freudian terms, as the child of the original parental dyad. More importantly, the symbolic substitution targets the old prejudices between the Christians and the Jews; it emphasizes the Jewish parentage of Christ and challenges the damaging claim that was used by some to justify the Holocaust as the punishment for “those who killed Christ.”

Ultimately, it is the character of Barbara who has the courage to interpellate history. Upon finding out about Regina’s pregnancy, Barbara flies into a rage and is

ready to denounce “the Jew living in her house.” But typically for Kolski, Barbara’s own body forces her to change her mind. When she is approaching the local Gestapo quarters, she is suddenly overcome by sickness. She vomits and at this very moment decides to incorporate Regina and her baby into her marriage. From now on, she will pretend to be pregnant, and once the time comes she will “give birth” to Regina’s child. When Barbara returns home, Jan has already withdrawn – in this shot one can barely see him in the deep shadows of a staircase. Jan gives in to Barbara’s bizarre plan and starts a slow decline into alcoholism. From that point on, the narrative tension oscillates between the two women. In her study of the trope of motherhood in *Away from the Window*, Elżbieta Ostrowska observes how this peculiar intimacy between a Jewish woman and a Polish one subverts the cultural stereotypes of femininity usually assigned to these two ethnic groups. Ostrowska notes, “A notion of lack, introduced in the beginning of this film, recurs here once again and paradoxically unifies the two female characters, Regina and Barbara, who lead lonely lives overshadowed by the memories of the past” (179).

Interestingly, the site of viewer’s identification rests with Regina even when her screen presence fades into the darkness of the wardrobe. Many shots assume Regina’s point of view: the camera surveys the apartment and follows the married couple from the inside of Regina’s hiding place. These shots make the viewer one with Regina and show reality and history as a function of human interiority. In other shots, the camera transgresses Regina’s point of view and becomes visible. These sequences do not originate in close-ups of Regina’s face (as is the case in the identification shots discussed above). They are simply disconnected glances taken from behind the furniture or from the inside of other enclosures in the apartment. Because these shots dissociate its physically

obstructed framing from Regina's private vision, the viewer becomes aware of the camera itself and its manipulative role in representing history.

In *Away from the Window*, Kolski focuses on an intimate collectivity of a married couple and shows how history enters this collectivity very quietly but irrevocably. All three characters participate in recasting their beliefs and expectations. And most importantly, this remodeling never reaches any consensus. History in this film is not a spectacle as it would be in a war film or a heritage film. In fact, it is through absence and silence that Kolski creates the feeling of historical change. It is also significant that this story of genealogy and inheritance defies the usual patriarchal frame: it is told from the perspective of the female fugitive and her illegitimate child. Indeed, most of the film is about the three women (Regina, Barbara, and the daughter Hanusia). History of the nation is problematized by familial politics, as public history is being retold in the form of a family chronicle.

In all his films, Kolski emphasizes the conflict between the slow-paced daily existence of the locals and the turbulent forces of history. He celebrates and at the same time criticizes the endangered way of life in the provincial countryside. The region's transition into modernity is depicted as a process of rare intensity, the completion of which is being continuously questioned by the people affected by it. One of the most appealing features of this cinematic universe is its inclination to deconstruct the binaries that shape the identity of a given community. This deconstructive impetus along with the style that evokes the "structural disjunction of historical raw material" (Jameson 311) illustrate the historical change as something that stems from the individual's acute awareness of his/her interiority with regard to history.

## Chapter 4

### Clandestine Human and Cinematic Passages in the United Europe

“With the collapse of the Communist empire and the promise of an alternative social system, the crumbling of the east-west frontier seems, not the opening of another set of rooms in ‘our common European home’, as Gorbachev hoped, but the opening up of the center of Europe to new cold winds sweeping down from the steppes. Nationalism, ethnic absolutism, religious bigotry and economic backwardness threaten to descend. As the Ladas and Skodas chug westwards, and the pornography and hamburgers wing their way eastwards, western Europeans are beginning to talk about Russians, Poles, Bulgarians, Hungarians, Romanians and Albanians in the same language they used to reserve for North Africans, Arabs and Turks. No sooner have the barriers collapsed but Europe is busy constructing a new set of margins for itself.”

-- *Stuart Hall*

\*

Despite the 2004 absorption of most of East Central Europe into the European Union (the EU) and the official coming together of the “great family” of European nations, there persist imaginary lines of distinction between the East and the West within the EU that seem to be more persistent than even state borders. The reality of these imaginary barriers is evidenced by the whole array of clandestine passages that continue to take place across the great European divide: the Iron Curtain. I insist on thinking about the Iron Curtain in the present tense, because despite the end of the Cold War and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, which came to physically embody the Iron Curtain, the separation between the Western and Eastern portions of Europe stands strong. The widely televised demolition of the Berlin Wall that began in November 1989 was a euphoric spectacle that did little to undo the divisions between the European center and its

continental periphery that are stronger than concrete and iron. As is the case with these kinds of barriers, the great divide begins with imagination, the human faculty responsible for fostering connections but also for not allowing these connections to thrive. Unfortunately, the imagination of Europeans is fraught with new fears concerning the inhabitants from behind the Iron Curtain.

The anxiety accompanying the said distinction has recently taken the shape of a new specter that is haunting Europe: the specter of the Polish Plumber. This new apparition arrived on the political scenes of Western Europe in the summer of 2005. It was first summoned in France among its protectionists and Eurosceptics, who were worried about the free influx of labor from the new, poorer members of the EU. The latest draft of the European Constitution, which at the time was awaiting ratification by all the EU members, would guarantee free movement of labor across Europe, on top of freeing the transfer of capital and goods. As we now know, France and the Netherlands voted against this constitution proposal, which in turn stalled the ratification process in other countries, thus dealing another blow against the status of the East Central European members in the Union. The first hostile action of this kind was taken on the eve of the 2004 accession, when the old EU members breached their promises (against the guarantees in the original EU foundational treaty) and informed the new members of the law granting the old members the right to refuse or limit the freedom of movement for labor and services. Only Britain, Ireland and Sweden kept their promises. The other twelve original members were already at work mounting the fear campaign that would use the specter of the Polish Plumber as an effigy for the greedy, barely educated hoards



of East Central European immigrants who were to flood Western Europe as soon as they were set free.<sup>40</sup>

Today the EU seems to be farther than ever from accepting a common constitution that would once and for all obliterate the double standards for two different faces of Europe – standards which originated during the mapping out of Europe by the philosophers and writers of the Enlightenment and which were solidified by the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s carving up of the continent according to political influences of Soviet Russia and the United States. Why does the unified Europe question its *raison d’être* by saying “no” to the common legislation right at the time when the union has finally opened up to include most of the European geographic territory? Is it that the potential absorption of the object would destabilize the laboriously constructed edifice of the subject? An offence to reason, this ironic twist in European affairs is something that East Central Europeans know very well. As Czesław Miłosz observed, “The very condition of being a Pole or a Czech or a Hungarian becomes an object of his irony, which colours his approach to life” (“Central European Attitudes” 118).

In the vein of this kind of defensive ironic stance, the Polish Tourist Organization (POT; a government tourist agency) has transformed the French fear campaign into an advertising campaign promoting travel to Poland. One of the series of posters issued by POT gives a full and able body to the specter of the Polish Plumber, who assures the French public of his intention to remain in Poland, where travelers should come to visit. The slogan reads “Je reste en Pologne; Venez nombreux,” which translates into

---

<sup>40</sup> As luck would have it, France, where the tale of the Polish Plumber was first told, suffers from a shortage of plumbers. On October 17, 2005, *Newsweek* reported that the French plumbing union had 6,000 vacancies and only about 150 Polish plumbers worked in France on limited contracts.

something like “I will stay in Poland; All of you come.” The poster directly addresses the fears of Western Europeans and offers a promise of containment, but it also spells out the condition under which this containment can be secured: the Western tourists must come and leave some hard currency in Poland, if they don’t want the Poles to come and get it. The poster uses humor, but at the same time, through the selection of the model, and the erotic innuendos inscribed in his representation, it hints at market exchanges far more sinister than illegal sojourn work of skilled workers.

What is most disconcerting about the specter of the Polish Plumber haunting Western Europe is not the fact that it was conjured into being in defiance of the loudly pronounced EU enlargement sentiments on the part of Western politicians and against the evident economic reality, which shows unprecedented growth for the stagnant Western European economies ever since entering new markets in East Central Europe. What is even more disturbing about it is the rhetoric used by the Western politicians and unionists in creating the specter. These activists claimed to act in the name of working class solidarity, on behalf of not only the Western European workers, but also interestingly, on behalf of those unfortunate East Central European workers whose consciousness has dissipated ever since capitalism pushed communism out of the Soviet block and Lech Wałęsa retired.

In a gesture not unlike that of the agents of Soviet Communism communicated many decades earlier, Western unionists today are addressing their Eastern “comrades” in a warning against the evils of international capitalism, here represented by the European Union’s economic agenda. At the same time, their rhetoric assumes a patronizing tenor. In “Social Europe in the Throes of Enlargement,” Marjorie Jouen and Catherine Papant

talk about the ethos of civic solidarity among Western Europeans as the crucial component of a civic society that guarantees social protection and sufficient collective services for its people. Among the new EU members, the authors detect few states able to recognize the value of civic solidarity: those lucky ones are the states that have been exposed to the cultural influences of the Prussian and the Austro-Hungarian Empires. The remaining new EU members are allegedly “unfamiliar with the solidarity of the European social model” (16).

Most East Central Europeans would appreciate the various ironies at play in the discourse of Western leftists who call upon the imperial past of Europe in their search for enlightened (and Enlightened) solidarity of progressive-minded citizens. But in order to prevent the irony from morphing into plain sarcasm, one must begin the process of rethinking East Central Europe as a locale with a history that cannot be absorbed by socio-political theories that work for Western Europe (or theories that worked for Soviet Russia for that matter). When Western unionists admonish East Central European workers for their blind adherence to the mechanisms of global capitalist economy, they fail to recognize the reality behind their own assent to power and the history of their status quo that is dependent on a real, well functioning economy, on the existence of old capital and the well developed middle class, and more importantly on a predictable economic model. This kind of economic history was never a part of East Central European history.

In fact, the closest this region of Europe ever got to establishing a proletariat was during the era of enforced communism, when previously agrarian economy was turned almost overnight into an economy reliant mostly on heavy industry. In that sense, the

proletariat in East Central Europe was a figment of imagination or the work of communist imperialism – proletariat needed to be invented fast in order to justify the hostile ideology against the capitalists who were no more solid in presence in the area than the fabricated proletariat. East Central Europe was building communism without the proletariat as Marx imagined it, and is now building capitalism without capitalists. So who exactly is capitalizing on the controversial EU membership? In the answer to this question, one must go back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the inception of modernity as an economic as well as a social project: modernization is not only defined as the accumulation of private capital in technology-based economy, but also as a transformation from the society of rank order to that of class stratification. As it turns out, in negotiating its modernity project, East Central Europe has always relied more on the cultural bourgeoisie (the educated middle class accumulating cultural capital: *Bildungsbürgertum*) than its small and underdeveloped economic bourgeoisie. In their analysis of the economic changes in the region after 1989, Gil Eyal, Iván Szelényi and Eleanor Townsley observe:

One distinguishing characteristic of modern Central European history is that from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the expansion of the education system preceded the developments of markets. ...In this context, the relatively large and well-developed university system was the major avenue of social mobility for those social groups dislocated by the emancipation of the serfs and the abolition of the guild system—that is, the smaller landed gentry, artisans and Jews. (71)

And as such, the cultural bourgeoisie has always been prone to idealism, which alternated between rightist and leftist radicalism, between the Fascist Right and the revolutionary

Left. But first and foremost, *Bildungsbürgertum* engaged in embourgeoisement of the dispossessed social groups, and in general, in the process of placing the displaced in the social dialogue.

Therefore, East Central European society, despite a wide array of political and historical disenchantments, has never experienced the disenchantment with capitalist modernity in the way that Max Weber conceptualized it, when he saw the modern man as enslaved by his economic condition: “[...] the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the ‘saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.’ But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage” (181). When in late 1970s, it suddenly became apparent that the communist project of modernization broke down beyond repair (another sort of disenchantment), some members of *Bildungsbürgertum* – the dissident intelligentsia – in East Central Europe switched gears and conducted a thorough critique of the socialist experiment, only to embark on another project with a new promise of enchantment. This time they were to build an “authentic community” guided solely by truth and transparency. In this new imagined community, the dissidents would become the good shepherds of the flock (Foucault’s agents of “pastoral power”). Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley describe the dissidents as the “community of saints,” who set out to reform the disillusioned society by setting a good example of authentic life:

The moral force of this example was underlined, in the eyes of dissidents, by the fact that they *sacrificed*—or, at least were willing to sacrifice—all they had in the name of truth and morality. It was this moral authority which, dissidents believed, possessed the power to transform society into a community of responsible, moral individuals. (92)

The dissidents did eventually oust the compromised communists and, to some degree, reformed the bankrupt social system. Unfortunately, rampant corruption which has dominated post-communist governments since 1989 shows that, once again, the promise of enchantment has been broken. In the world of cinema, the best expression of this post-1989 disappointment might well be found in the center of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Color Trilogy*, in *White* (1993).

*White* is a classic example of a film that subverts national containment, but at the same time offers a critique of the utopian ideal of one Europe. Kieślowski's screen trilogy was produced at the time of the first EU enlargement. The work as a whole is saturated with the spirit of hope and renewal for the post-1989 Europe: the New Europe.<sup>41</sup> The protagonists in *Blue* are commissioned to compose a "Concerto for the Unification of Europe." The film project, a Polish-French co-production, was an outcome of the liberalization of the usual paths of cultural exchange between the Western European film industry and its Eastern equivalent. One of the main financial sources for making the trilogy was Eurimages: the European Cinema Support Fund, sponsored by the Council of Europe.<sup>42</sup> And although the *Color Trilogy*, with its conscious bow towards the French tradition of modern nationhood, perpetuates the idea of film as a national prestige object (the trilogy entered the European canon of the high-art cinema), it also contains a strong message against the ideal of one Europe, constituted as a community of equal

---

<sup>41</sup> The term "New Europe" is favored by the EU diplomats in Brussels, but like the "New World" it is a term fraught with controversy. Coined by the agents of power from the "old Europe," it is used to cover over the inequalities still existing among the old and the new members of the EU. It is also supposed to communicate the message of the new, progressive politics and a conscious break from the history of the European colonization.

<sup>42</sup> Eurimages defined its objectives as follows, "Eurimages' first objective is cultural, in that it endeavors to support works which reflect the multiple facets of European society whose common roots are evidence of a single culture. The second one is economic, in that the Fund invests in an industry which, while concerned with commercial success, is interested in demonstrating that cinema is one of the arts and should be treated as such" (Eurimages)

nation-states. *White* delivers a pause in the process of smoothing over the history of colonization present in East Central Europe and the euphoric passage into global capitalism that was expected to come immediately after the region's emergence from behind the Iron Curtain. In the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Western world was quick to see the countries of the post-Soviet empire as liberated and ready to join Europe that has finalized its own uneasy task of decolonization decades earlier. The assumption was that the now independent nation-states will transition and contribute to the new, improved world system. The transition, however, turned out to be trying and often filled with disillusionment.

Anikó Imre sees this accelerated push of the post-1989 East Central Europe into the West as hasty and detrimental to the understanding of the kinds of socio-economic oppression that escape the usual West/non-West binary dominant in post-colonial studies:

The loss of interest in East European films has been a part of a more general loss of interest in the Second World in the aftermath of the post-Berlin Wall euphoria. The celebration engendered by the end of socialism failed to create an equal ground on which to integrate Eastern Europe in the global circulation of ideas. Rather than an opportunity to learn from the experience of socialism and allow existing theories of global culture to be transformed by the lessons, the energy released by the fall of the Wall became transformed into the celebration of the victory of capitalism, which rendered superfluous a sustained engagement with the socialist past and the postsocialist present. (xv-xvi)

Although in itself a remnant of the Cold War political rhetoric, the category of the Second World is getting renewed attention from a number of scholars dealing with the

post-Soviet cultural territory (e.g. Anikó Imre, Katarzyna Marciniak, Dina Jordanova), against Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's rejection of the Second World as a viable rubric in their assessment of global and transnational paradigms (26), and against Zygmunt Bauman's claim that the Second World has disappeared (51).

The notion of the Second World is now often used as a conceptual tool to unhinge the limiting First World/Third World dichotomy, to critique the politics of location, and to conduct a more nuanced analysis of communities affected by state socialism. The Second World can function as an operational category that allows one to theorize the artistic production coming from the in-between cultures that share the same history of the Soviet colonization and the post-Soviet reconstruction, of failed socialist reforms and failing democracy, of whiteness that is not aligned with privilege and colonialism. In her analysis of the Second World immigrant rage, Katarzyna Marciniak explains:

Despite the fact that many of those countries wish to see themselves as *Western* (and, in fact, always detested the label of Eastern Europe) especially now, on the wave of the liberatory rhetoric of the "unification of Europe," it seems perhaps more appropriate to claim that as the second world slowly enters the economic realm of transnational capital, it still lingers between what it once was (non-Western, ideologically and economically; under the colonizing power of the Soviet Union) and what it is not yet (Western). (55)

In *White*, Kieślowski makes room for the inspection of the long and difficult cultural shift that the era of post-communism turned out to be for the survivors of the disastrous utopia and anticipates what Masao Miyoshi calls "the neocolonial practice of displacement and ascendancy" (79), the practice that is part and parcel of global



corporate capitalism, the system that might eventually replace the failed attempt at socialism in East Central Europe. In this least popular part of the trilogy, Kieślowski foreshadows the pressing problems currently to be found at the heart of the European Community: displacement, migrant work, flesh trafficking, exile and economic crises, from the perspective of the inhabitant of the Second World: “the ‘other’ Europe, the impoverished cousin to the ‘real’ thing” (Marciniak 55). These are all issues commonly discussed in the context of the Third World cinema and the European post-colonial cinema (focused on the traditional metropolitan-colonial paradigm), but emphatically silenced with regard to the East Central European cinema, especially in the theoretical and critical discourses devoted to that cinema.

Western film scholars continue to apply the Cold War conceptual mappings to all films coming from the region, and they keep on “privileging films and directors who took an oppositional stand in relation to communist totalitarianism in their filmic commentaries on national events of great historical importance” (Imre xii). The national resistance against the Soviet oppression continues to be the trope used in talking about East Central European cinema, despite the fact that for over a decade now the filmmakers of the region have been producing commercial genre films (in contrast to the art house cinema of their predecessors), as well as creating poignant and touching illustrations of the triumphs and frustrations of the post-communist transition. The cinema of East Central Europe is still largely thought of as a cinema of the national auteur, whose preoccupations rest in the realms of morality, freedom, universal humanity, and spirituality. This approach does not allow for the particularities of life in the post-Wall Europe (issues of subjectivity, gender, ethnicity, and class), which are decidedly

highlighted in the recent cinematic self-representation, to enter the theoretical discourse on the reel and real identities of the region.

Kieślowski's *Blue* (1993) and *Red* (1994) are set in France and Switzerland respectively and deal with the universal aspects of humanity as it is represented by the members of the European bourgeoisie. *White* cuts through that narrative and reveals another set of universal aspects of a very different kind of humanity. It is humanity-in-transit, the kind of humanity that seems to populate most of the world today. *Blue* and *Red* are dominated by characters who are securely ensconced in their upper middle class lives in the European metropolis (Paris and Geneva). *White*, on the other hand, moves the dramatic action to Poland; but before that happens, the film spends a significant amount of time contemplating the situation of a foreigner in France. In Kieślowski's hands the three colors of the French flag correspond to three ideals: liberty, equality and fraternity. *White* takes on the examination of the notion of equality. On one level, the film is about equality within a relationship, between the husband and wife, the possibility of equality within the dynamics of love. On another level, this is a film about the possibility of marriage between the two Europes and what place in this liaison the idea of equality should occupy.

The opening scene of *White* takes place in front of and inside the Palace of Justice in Paris, the emblematic edifice of the European institution of law. Within minutes, however, this stable, history-consecrated structure is shaken out of its foundations. Through parallel editing, the shot of this particular courthouse (a permanent fixture in the French time and space continuum) is juxtaposed with another shot, this time it is a close-up of a moving object: a beat-up trunk slowly passing down an airport conveyor belt.

Back to the courthouse, we see, in low angle, a pair of man's legs walking towards the gate of the Palace of Justice. These legs are poorly shod and perform a walk that stands out from the rest of the Parisian crowd walking down the same sidewalk. The man that the camera singles out from the well dressed, fast walking, generally entitled Parisians is traversing space in a manner that signals insecurity and a vague sense of loss.<sup>43</sup> The man half-runs and half-totter. In the meantime the editing takes us back to the trunk on a conveyor belt, moving us away from the familiar Parisian street to the arbitrary space of an unknown airport. Consequently, the rooted idea of the place (symbolized by a piece of architecture that represents French nationhood) becomes unsettled by an image of what Marc Augé calls "the non-place" of supermodernity.

In his analysis of the late capitalist re-distribution of humanity around the globe, Augé discusses the side-effects caused by the recent phenomenon of time-space compression. He identifies spaces that stand in opposition to the sociological notion of place defined by land, roots, and the concept of nation-state. Non-places are airport terminals, railway stations, highways, gas stations, and all sorts of lounges where the travelers of the world await the means of transportation for the next leg of their endless journey. "The installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods (high-speed roads and railways, interchanges, airports) are just as much non-places as the means of transport themselves, or the great commercial centers, or the extended transit camps where the planet's refugees are parked" (34). Kieślowski's choice to superimpose the image of cargo onto the opening sequence at the center of his European trilogy is a

---

<sup>43</sup> Kieślowski sharpens the contrast by inserting into the crowd a visual quotation from the work of Robert Doisneau, the canonical photographer of the Parisian street. Briefly, we see a couple elevated on a doorstep and exchanging a kiss à la Doisneau's "Le Braiser de l'Opera" (1950). Furthermore, this anonymous kiss foreshadows the film's preoccupation with the East Central European immigrant's inability to partake in the European language of romance.

statement difficult to ignore. At the very same time when Europe is celebrating its coming together, the film is anxious to disclose the shadowy underpinnings of this process of community making. This very anxiety allows us to treat *White* as an example of transnational filmmaking, which sets out to critically assess the conditions of the First World's absorption of the Second World. This conflict between the urge to unify (and equalize) and the impulse to preserve the difference is an endemic global-versus-local tension, of which Augé writes, "For the time we live in is paradoxical in this aspect, too: at the very same moment when it becomes possible to think in terms of the unity of terrestrial space, and the big multinational networks grow strong, the clamour of particularisms rises; clamour from those who want to stay home in peace, clamour from those who want to find a mother country" (34-35).

*White* zooms in on this "clamour of particularisms" that enters the European metropolis along with the white hordes of immigrants from behind the Curtain, who refuse to act and speak in a cosmopolitan manner, and yet expect to be treated equally. Karol Karol (Zbigniew Zamachowski), the protagonist of *White*, also the awkward pedestrian on a Paris street, is one such clamoring immigrant (a Polish hairdresser married to a French citizen), knocking on the doors of European justice. On the day when we encounter him for the first time, Karol is on the way to his divorce trial. Right before he reaches the security guard standing at the gate to the Palace of Justice, Karol stops, hesitates, looks around and pulls out his summons, ready to approach the guard. In heavily accented French, he asks the guard for directions. Reassured that he is at the right place, he begins to ascend the steps leading up to the Palace's entrance. At this moment, although he is physically rising to enter the forum where justice should be dealt, an

incident happens that marks Karol as a nuisance, on his way to a public disgrace. A flock of birds descends from the sky and glides right above Karol's head. Awestruck, he stops and looks up, only to be shat on by one of the birds. A smudge of yellowish pigeon waste lands on his shoulder.

The incident gains signification as the narrative unfolds and the camera pays increasing attention to the color white and the whole gamut of the off-white shades, just as there are multiple shades of equality in the New Europe. Kieślowski, a survivor of communism, was acutely aware that equality is always a matter of perspective, no less in the free Europe than in any other political system. In his own commentary on *White*, he says:

*White* is about equality understood as a contradiction. We understand the concept of 'equality', that we all want to be equal. But I think this is absolutely not true. I don't think anybody really wants to be equal. Everybody wants to be more equal. There's a saying in Polish: There are those who are equal and those who are more equal. That's what used to be said during Communism and I think it's still being said. (217)

When looked at through Kieślowski's incisive lens, the white doves that are being released into air as symbols of hope, peace and unification during many European Union ceremonies turn into dirty pigeons. The off-white bird waste that soils Karol's coat is only one visual incarnation of Kieślowski's message about the ambiguous status of the ideal of equality vis-à-vis the material history stored behind the ideal, the history of violent denial of equality to those who happen to stand on the other side of the barricade.

Once in the courtroom, Karol loses his dignity in front of his wife, the attorneys and the judge (Philippe Morier-Genoud). The French tribunal passes judgment about his insufficient virility. His wife, Dominique (Julie Delpy), demands a divorce because her Polish husband cannot perform his marital duty. When the judge asks Karol whether this accusation is true, Karol explains in utter humiliation that he used to satisfy his wife perfectly well when they lived in Poland, but he stopped performing after they moved to her country. Although we know that Karol has some command of French (he spoke it to the guard outside), in the courtroom he relies on an interpreter and addresses the judge in Polish. The distribution of affect in the courtroom is significant. Dominique is perfectly composed and has no qualms divulging publicly the most intimate details of her marriage. The judge is rather blasé about the case that he is adjudicating and not willing to listen to Karol's outbursts of emotion. Karol is begging for more time, for a chance to understand, for his wife to change her mind. With his comfort ruffled by this uncivilized eruption of passion, the judge asks Karol, "But what do you want?" Karol demands equality: "Where is equality? Only because I don't speak French, the judge will not listen to my arguments?" He feels like an intruder in his own marriage and a foreigner in his adopted country. His exile impacts his masculinity. His alienation as an outsider corrodes his subjectivity. His status in the French society is that of a deficient and pitiful resident alien. The scene ends with a stamp of abjection. After Dominique tells the judge that she no longer loves her husband, Karol rushes out to the bathroom and vomits violently, while holding onto the stark white toilet bowl.

Interestingly, Karol's inadequacy as an aspiring citizen of France presented through defective masculinity resonates with the representational code of an East Central

European foreigner in France established by Roman Polanski in *The Tenant* (1976). In this film, a certain Monsieur Trelkovsky (Roman Polanski), a naturalized citizen of France, has a hard time fitting in the Parisian community. He rents an apartment in an old Parisian house populated by unwelcoming and xenophobic locals. The apartment becomes available because its former tenant, the lesbian Simone, commits suicide by throwing herself out the window. The entire plot of the film centers on Trelkovsky's attempt to inhabit the foreign space and his mysterious morphing into a female figure, like Simone. In the end, the apartment, which seems to be animated by the hostile sentiments of all the neighbors from the building, literally ejects Trelkovsky: dressed in Simone's clothing and heavily made-up, he jumps from the window to a gruesome death in the courtyard.

His gender metamorphosis is an example of clandestine identity passage, whereupon an immigrant undertakes the work of reconstructing his or her subjectivity, here hyperbolized by a radical gender transfer. In *The Tenant* this reconstructive passage lingers on and does not lead to a positive resolution. It is depicted as a shameful masquerade conducted on the sly, in the crypt-like space. When Trelkovsky moves into Simone's apartment, it is literally the territory of the undead that he now occupies, since at that moment Simone is hovering between life and death in a hospital bed. Trelkovsky becomes arrested in that liminal space: he is seen on screen in dim, claustrophobic space, permanently lingering between sunrise and sunset, East and West. He is forced to play out the bizarre but common narrative of an East Central European as the descendant of

Count Dracula, the invasive degenerate Other misplaced in Europe proper.<sup>44</sup> Both Polanski and Kieślowski show the East Central European's degeneration as dilapidating masculinity (not the deviant, excessive sexuality, which constitutes the opposite end of the spectrum in representing the degenerate Other). The subversive power of the two films, however, depends on very different rhetorical and aesthetic strategies. While Polanski uses surrealist stylization and the narrative techniques of the horror film to visualize the pain and abjection of immigrant alienation, Kieślowski activates dark humor and parody to tell the story of regained masculinity and recuperated East Central European identity.

Parody in *White* works best in the realm of iconography. Kieślowski taps into a well-known and established language of symbols. He animates these symbols and uses them to question the values traditionally assigned to them. Marianne, the personification of the French Republic receives the most playful treatment from Kieślowski's camera.<sup>45</sup> Marianne first appears in the courtroom scene personified by Julie Delpy, whose body language, facial expressions, and all the physical elements of characterization (light, framing, make-up) work towards making the connection between her unhappy French wife and the symbol of the French Republic possible for the viewer to detect. Stunning Delpy, helped by a very steady and contemplative camera work, controls her face to the point where it takes on the characteristics of a perfect marble statue. Dominique is

---

<sup>44</sup> For theoretical analysis of Bram Stoker's Victorian narrative as the key component in the project of exoticizing East Central Europe see work by Neda Atanasoski, Eleni Coundouriotis, Katarina Gephardt, David Mandler, and Christina Stojanova.

<sup>45</sup> "Marianne, a national emblem of France, is a personification of Liberty and Reason. She is present in many places in France and holds a place of honour in town halls and law courts. She symbolizes the 'Triumph of the Republic,' a bronze sculpture overlooking the Place de la Nation in Paris. Her profile stands out on the official seal of the country, is engraved on French euro coins and appears on French postage stamps; it also was featured on the former French franc coins and banknotes. Marianne is considered one of the most prominent symbols of the French Republic...she was often used on pro-Republic iconography – and heavily caricatured and reviled by anti-Republicans." (Wikipedia)



painted by Kieślowski as a cold and ungrateful castrator, the soon to be ex-wife to an impotent husband. The analogy between Dominique and Marianne becomes explicit when Karol, soon after losing his case in court, accidentally spots a bust of Marianne in an antique shop. The camera frames the bust precisely the way that Dominique's head shot was framed in the courtroom scene: the visage dominates the right-hand side of the screen; a diegetic light source, in the form of a retro lamp, emanates diffused radiance from the left; and some old, honey-hued wood provides a warm and glowing backdrop. The immediate *mise en scène* provides a comfort zone for the female presence on screen. Dominique and Marianne belong to their surroundings, which are harmonious extensions of their private and public histories. What is more, the patina of time visible in the background legitimizes their rightful existence in this particular material reality.

Karol finds the statue irresistible and decides to steal it from the shop. Eventually, he takes it back to Poland with him. Ironically, the bust does not survive the journey; it is broken into pieces in the process – equality has no place in the post-communist Poland. Karol, however, who himself is badly bruised as a result of the manner in which he is forced to travel back home, collects all the pieces and painstakingly glues Marianne back together. At some point, we witness Karol steal a kiss from Marianne, in a scene that might well be the most caring and tender romantic exchange in the film. By fusing Marianne with Dominique, Kieślowski takes a satirical stab at nationalism and the ideal of equality that is supposed to bolster it. Marianne, the pure ideal itself – the sublimated signifier – has very little to do with equality among the human subjects who inhabit the nation. Marianne is a commodity and the commodity's use value is determined by the

market's demand. In this case, Karol uses the bust as a fetish object to compensate for the damage done to his ego by a French national.

*White* is an early critical appraisal of the benefits and shortcomings of the free market economy as it slowly entered the bankrupt, post-Soviet world during the early 1990s. *White* documents the slow shift from the era of nation-state (and nationalism) to the era of global neo-liberalism. Moreover, it shows how ultimately the latter still depends on the ideology of the former – global wealth cannot be accumulated without the endless and uninterrupted reiteration of the consolidating phantom of local unity (the myth of the autonomous community) that erases all kinds of structural contradictions (class distinctions) that could potentially impede the production-consumption cycle. The film points out the difference between capitalism operating in the old Europe and the nascent capitalism applied across the territory where the capital itself remains scarce.<sup>46</sup> The scene that accentuates the great divide between the two Europes, even after the removal of the Berlin Wall, is the scene of Karol's return to Poland as a piece of cargo. The scene is archetypal in the history of the East Central European cinema for it reverses and deconstructs the border crossings – the often tragic escapes from the communist East – so emblematic in the cinema of the region.

German cinema produced a plethora of films dealing with successful and failed attempts to escape across the Berlin Wall, the tensions of living in a divided city and divided nation, and the emotional toll exacted by the existence of the Wall (the Wall-

---

<sup>46</sup> Film scholars point out how in many recent films produced in Western Europe the territory of East Central Europe is depicted and openly spoken of as the striking phantom of the Western Europe's own, quite recent post-WWII past, characterized by the similar conditions of economic chaos, reliance on farming, urban migration, and poverty. In these films, Western Europeans look down upon the other Europe's struggle as an embarrassing reminder of their own repressed memory. For a thorough analysis of how this is represented in Italian cinema of post-1989 migration, see Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli's *Crossing New Europe: Postmodern Travel and The European Road Movie* (2006).

sickness: *Mauerkrankheit*): *Escape from East Berlin* (1962, dir. Robert Siodmak), *Divided Heaven* (1964, Dir. Konrad Wolf), *Wings of Desire* (1987, dir. Wim Wenders), *The Promise* (1995, dir. Margarethe von Trotta), *The Tunnel* (2001, dir. Roland Suso Richter), and most recently *The Lives of Others* (2006, dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck). In these cinematic memoirs (oftentimes based on documented accounts of actual experiences of life in the shadow of the Wall), the journey across the great East/West divide is always realized as a tragic escape from the totalitarian repression that makes home an unbearable place to live.

The films coming from the other countries in East Central Europe trace somewhat different trajectories of crossing borders, but they unanimously focus on the escape aspect of these journeys. In *300 Miles to Heaven* (1989, dir. Maciej Dejczer), a film based on a true story, two young brothers, who are doomed to live their childhood in the oppressive communist Poland, hide under the freight truck and almost effortlessly make their way North, to Sweden (changed to Denmark in the film, which was a Polish-Danish co-production). Wojciech Wójcik, who directed *There and Back* in 2002, sets his story in 1960s. The protagonist in this film is a surgeon working in a state hospital, whose wife and daughter left Poland for Australia. He cannot reunite with his family due to his “compromised past” (During WWII, he was a fighter in the underground military formation that opposed the Soviet invasion). Lonely and continuously persecuted, the surgeon agrees to join his patient in a bank robbery to obtain the money needed to purchase forged passports. In *Time Stands Still* (1982), the Hungarian director, Péter Gothár, tells the story of another family torn by the communist restrictions on immigration; this time it is the wife and children who remain behind the Iron Curtain and

are mistreated because of their relation to “the enemy of the people” – the husband and father who escaped the post-1956 political purges for the United States. The two teenage sons idolize American rock & roll, secretly have their first and only taste of Coca Cola, and eventually engage in an aborted attempt to escape Hungary. In *Daniel Takes a Train* (a.k.a. *Train Ride to Nowhere* 1983, dir. Pál Sándor), the protagonist is also a Hungarian teenager who gets ready to pay his way to the West, hidden in a freight truck, but at the last minute decides to remain with his mother. The main action of the film takes place at a roadside hotel, where the escapees are eagerly awaiting their “freedom” trucks. At the same time, they ponder the ethical meaning of their escape – is it searching for freedom or abandoning the ship?

In *White*, Kieślowski shows us a very different type of a clandestine border crossing: unlike in the films mentioned above, the direction of travel here is from West to East and the reason for the surreptitious traveling is not precipitated by direct political oppression. One might argue, however, that Karol has to leave France as a result of the persecution enacted by his wife, who takes all the marital assets, thus leaving Karol penniless, and the vague persecution of a Western government that is not terribly friendly towards foreigners. But what makes Karol’s passage back to Poland a cinematic landmark is the fact that the narrative makes it possible to be read as an example of migration motivated by neo-colonial forces.

The new migrant passages are often represented as clandestine to underscore the invisibility of the new colonizing agency. To be sure, the new European migration continues along the axis of East/West, with many East Central Europeans leaving their countries for economic reasons, to take up work in the West (often sojourn, temporary

employment). However, the more dynamic route in this regard is the South/North border, which is experiencing an unprecedented exodus of peoples from North Africa, Albania, former Yugoslavia, and the Far East, who are willing to relocate to any of the EU countries, including the recent poorer member states. What makes the last decade truly different in terms of patterns of migration in Europe is the movement of migrants from the capitalist countries of the West to the post-Soviet territories. Among this wave of immigrants, one finds returning ex-pats (often the Cold War refugees) and the international foreign investors, both drawn to East Central Europe as the new economic frontier:

Open for the first time to Western investment and business, the East in the 1990s became a true new frontier for Europe. A movement that can be defined as neo-colonial involved Western investors, entrepreneurs and, in some cases, commens going East to take advantage of a situation which was perceived as being in transformation, and which was believed to offer new opportunities of an economic and, in some cases, not-so-legal nature. After years of closure and constraint, post-imperialist Europe had at its disposal a new land to colonise. (Mazierska and Rascaroli 151)

Karol, in *White*, clearly participates in this new economic trend. Once in Poland, he conceives a wicked plan of revenge against Dominique, which involves an entrepreneurial hoax of dubious ethical standing. The scheme comes to him as soon as he realizes that the post-communist transition to liberal democracy leads through a gray zone of completely unregulated market conditions, where every businessman is also his own best legislator. In short, Karol builds a quick fortune, stages his own funeral, and makes

his ex-wife the sole beneficiary of his estate. Thus Dominique is lured to visit Poland and, as a result of circumstantial evidence, she is accused of murdering her husband for profit. The positions of power shift with the territory; we witness Dominique being mistreated as a foreigner. We might guess she has received an unfair trial in the Polish court, because at the end of the movie we see her trapped in a Polish prison.

Karol returns to his country on an airplane as a piece of luggage. A fellow Pole, Mikołaj, whom Karol meets in the Parisian metro where he is playing his comb for change, offers to transport Karol (whose passport has been lost) inside of his trunk, the same trunk that the viewer observes rolling down a conveyor belt in the opening sequence of the film. Karol decides to go ahead with this plan out of sheer desperation. When the time comes, he crams his body into the tight container and brings only one thing with him: the bust of Marianne. The trip goes as scheduled until the cargo lands at Okęcie Airport in Warsaw. Here, baggage handlers are running a scam, which involves stealing luggage off the Western planes. Of course, the trunk containing Karol is stolen. Karol's method of travel brings to the forefront of Kieślowski's film the absurdity of the ease with which some people travel today (any location is just a flight or two away) and, on the other hand, the confinement and reduction that this travel enforces on others. The message here is that more and more people keep on moving for economic reasons, not necessarily due to political or religious persecution, and in the process they turn into human freight. The postindustrial global economies are putting humans in a state of pervasive deterritorialization. These global processes, Kieślowski points out, are changing the face of Europe, not exactly in the direction envisioned by the EU.

In his seminal essay on exilic identity in transnational cinema, Hamid Naficy recognizes the existence of the “phobic space” that all migrants inhabit, some of them only temporarily, others for ever, on their way to the new, host location. This phobic space is a claustrophobic space that both confines and comforts, it is a liminal space “of retrenchment in the face of what is perceived to be foreign, often hostile” (131). Among many different shapes that the exilic prison takes on, Naficy focuses on the recurrence of the suitcase: “The suitcase is a potent symbol of exilic subjectivity because it contains souvenirs from the homeland, denotes travel and living a provisional life, and connotes a pervasive sense of being closed in, profound deprivation, and diminution of one’s possibilities in the world” (136). Naficy goes on to recount an actual incident of an Iranian woman traveling in a suitcase, as a piece of cargo on the plane to the United States and not surviving the journey. Her husband had a Green Card, she did not. Their desperate attempt to reunite ended in the woman’s death from asphyxiation and the husband’s suicide upon discovering his wife’s body. This true story was adapted to screen in 1989 as *The Suitors* (dir. Ghasem Ebrahimian). Kieślowski’s *White*, although a less dramatic illustration of a human being objectified into cargo, offers an important complication in restaging the spectacle of the exilic claustrophobia.

Karol is returning “home,” not entering a foreign country. Still, his subjectivity remains altered by the experience of exile – his home will never be the same – and he continues to inhabit the phobic space. The condition of exile, the interstitial positioning of a subject vis-à-vis the host society, runs deep and the identity changes it brings about are irreversible. Karol, like every immigrant, returns home with a baggage that will always stall his sense of belonging. In his suitcase, he is not bringing “souvenirs from the

homeland” but a souvenir from his host land. His identity has already recorded multiple fractures inflicted by multiple passages. His return to his homeland registers as going into another exile. Naficy reminds us that films made by transnational filmmakers are always sites of intertextual translation between the particular filmmaker’s exilic situation (self-narrativization) and the fictional material expressed through generic conventions (121). As such an artistic undertaking, one might read *White* as Kieślowski’s own diary of exile: his brief but taxing affair with the French culture and with Europe proper. Upon finishing the trilogy, the director announced his sudden decision to quit filmmaking. *White*, then, becomes its author’s phobic space, the casing of retrenchment against the critical gazes coming from the East and the West, a center of the trilogy about the unification of Europe that slips away, evades and ruptures its message.

Visually, one might pinpoint the opening of this rupture to the very first moment when the narrative moves from the West to East Central Europe. The moment is choreographed as a panoramic shot of a huge dump, where the crooked baggage handlers regularly bring their loot to be divided. In the original screenplay, Kieślowski and Piesiewicz describe the scenery in the stage direction as “An enormous rubbish heap where huge garbage trucks look like toys. Flocks of black birds circle overhead” (127). On screen, the *mise en scène* materializes as a particularly gloomy winter landscape, with dirty (off-white) snow covering the ground and grey mist saturating the place with the air of misery and moral deterioration. The baggage handlers arrive at the scene in a beat up truck and quickly proceed to unload the stolen suitcases. As they strain their backs to unload the trunk containing Karol, one of the men proclaims how the spoils will be divided among the four of them. Everything will be split five ways and he is getting two



shares. This is the land of the survival of the fittest and egalitarianism has no place in it. Once they pry open Karol's trunk, the bust of Marianne is promptly removed, laughed at, and tossed outside of the frame. Then Karol receives equally rough handling. He is body-searched and beaten. The thugs lose their patience upon discovering that Karol's pockets are empty and his watch is Russian made! While Russian watches, gold jewelry, TV sets, binoculars and cameras used to be hot commodities during communism,<sup>47</sup> they are now perceived as tokens of a bankrupt economy – shoddy goods that no one has any use for (except for the few nostalgia-driven collectors). Apparently, there is a new local hierarchy in place, according to which Russia is the land of polar bears, poisonous counterfeit vodka and recycled Kalashnikovs.

Stylistically, the scene contributes to the long tradition of depicting this part of Europe as the remote, underdeveloped land of darkness and prejudice, but in the choice of location – the dump – it also anticipates the most recent configuration in the European imaginary. Immediately after the collapse of communism, and before the newly-elected democratic governments could create appropriate legislation, East Central Europe became literally the dumping ground for toxic waste and bio-hazardous material shipped from the First World countries with the help of the budding local “entrepreneurs,” whose greed superseded any concern for the safety of the environment. Although this smuggling of waste has since been regulated by strict laws and an efficient system of penalties, the idea of East Central Europe as a dumping ground for used-up Western commodities

---

<sup>47</sup> People living in the satellite countries would travel to the Soviet Union on cultural exchange programs and smuggle back these goods, then to be sold on the black market. These routine contraband trips were an important source of income for thousands of families. My uncle still possesses more than thirty pairs of theatre binoculars that did not sell. He did, however, manage to sell another fifty pairs during the last visit of John Paul II to Białystok in June 1991.

persists.<sup>48</sup> Curiously, the neo-colonial domination of the Second World does not so much rely on the exploitation of the local resources, as it operates through securing consumer space for the excess of Western productivity (fueled by the Third World labor).

Kieślowski's vision of the workings of neo-colonialism is brutally honest with regard to identifying all the parties implicated in the project. The mechanisms of global capital do not depend on a one-way model of domination: the external corporate capitalists (the metropolis) invading and exploiting local communities (the periphery). Rather, it is a process of asymmetrical, uneven distribution of global technologies, which, in turn, relies on local adaptations in accordance with the logic of the local community (taking into account the local heterogeneity of place, culture, religion, ethnicity, class etc.). Kieślowski shows how when it comes to the mastery of profit there is no "us" against "them." What is profitable is often dressed up as patriotic, and the patriotic has little regard for people's interests. In the new system, which operates through compromised ethics of infinitely blurred paths of responsibility, both the political right and left have their hands deep in capitalizing from the new commodity flows made possible by dissolving some boundaries and strengthening others.<sup>49</sup> As a transnational cultural worker himself, Kieślowski is well equipped to comment on the predicament of the disappearance of the clear inside/outside, colonized/colonizer perspective. When

---

<sup>48</sup> In their analysis of recent Italian films preoccupied with migrant movement between Italy and the post-Soviet territories, Mazierska and Rascaroli point out the frequent formulations of these territories as sites for refuse disposal, of both material and cultural kinds. They argue that in many of these cinematic representations "Eastern Europe is the dump for the old Western world's goods, including popular culture products, which are spread as a vehicle for Western imperialism," and that these films portray "the East as being naïve and vulnerable to the society of the spectacle, as much as the West used to be in the past, thus reinforcing the idea of the east as a mirror of the recent past of Western society" (159).

<sup>49</sup> In his essay "From Class Struggle to Classless Struggle?" Etienne Balibar writes about the global capital's dependence on securing the cohesion and smooth functioning of the "internal market." This market is best protected by the ideology of nationalism that elevates the criterion of ethnic integration above social class struggle, thus leading to the formation and fortification of territorial units that accelerate the global flow of capital and the accumulation of wealth.

discussing the cultural and economic exchanges in the borderless world of contemporary globalization, Masao Miyoshi argues, “Once absorbed into the ‘chronopolitics’ of the secular West, colonized space cannot reclaim autonomy and seclusion; once dragged out of their precolonial state, the indigenes of peripheries have to deal with the knowledge of the outside world, irrespective of their own wishes and inclinations” (81). The concept of knowledge and its function in the post-Soviet transitioning economy receive careful attention from Kieślowski.

Karol’s going home is not constructed as a return to an authentic, finally free, self-ruling local community. Instead, his passage back to Poland mimics the elusive influences of the Western “chronopolitics” upon the local sphere of the post-Soviet East Central Europe. The fact that Karol possesses the “knowledge of the outside world” places him in the position of power vis-à-vis his countrymen. This outsider’s knowledge, along with his native local knowledge, allows him to navigate his homeland as a mediating agent between the global and the local. By granting Karol possession of the cultural capital of a sort, Kieślowski stresses the role of knowledge as the key resource of globalization. When Pierre Bourdieu first defined the concept of the cultural capital (*le capital culturel*), he tied it to the idea of place (endowed with appropriate educational infrastructure) and the institutionalized network of social relations that imbue the individual with a set of skills, expectations, symbolic codes, and the erudition needed to obtain a certain (high) status in society. According to this theory, the cultural capital, not unlike the economic capital, is often a matter of inheritance, a matter of being born into the right household. The cultural capital usually converts into economic capital, conferring power and status upon its beholder. Bourdieu imagined the cultural capital in

the stationary context of accumulation, tradition and time. In *White*, the cultural capital is accrued through the experience of exile. The educational infrastructure that fosters the growth of this capital is the trunk: the symbol of the transnational non-place. Being able to traverse cultures and languages constitutes a new kind of cultural capital that equips immigrants (regardless of their social class, gender, or ethnicity) with dual vision required in the new world order: the fusion of the local with the global.

While in France, Karol is shown as lacking in knowledge. His access to the cultural capital is barred because of Karol's inability to accumulate sufficient linguistic capital (In Bourdieu's theory, the linguistic capital – the mastery of language – is a form of the embodied cultural capital). The viewer, however, gets a sense of Karol's active investment in acquiring the foreign language: we hear him attempt to speak French in public (if only briefly) and, in the court scene, by observing his facial expressions, we see that he understands what the French officials say, before his interpreter explains it to him in Polish. Two scenes, in particular, illuminate how linguistic capital is linked to the economic capital. The first of these scenes depicts Karol trying to access his bank assets soon after leaving the courtroom. He tries to use his MTA card to withdraw some cash. The card is confiscated. Karol approaches a bank employee for explanation, but his plea, expressed in broken French, is met by the clerk's stoic, yet stern "Your account has been frozen." Karol demurely demands his bank card back; the clerk holds up the card to Karol's face and cuts it in half. With tears in his eyes, Karol begs for his money; the clerk remains silent. The viewer, by implication, understands that Karol's wife, fully literate in French and well versed in the rules of the local banking system, swindled him out of his

share of their marital property. It is also obvious that Karol, were he to speak in native French, would not have received such a curt treatment at the bank.

The second scene that further emphasizes the role of language as a form of knowledge that bestows status, followed by economic weight, takes place in the metro station. Karol has just called his ex-wife, who takes this opportunity to sadistically force Karol to listen to her lovemaking with another man. Karol hangs up, but the payphone retains two francs of leftover credit. Since by now, Karol has been duped one too many times, he will not let this insult slide. He is done with being a model legal alien – an invisible subject grateful for being tolerated by the host society. He turns to the metro station attendant and politely but firmly informs the man that the payphone stole his money. At the same time as he is working hard to find the right French words for his complaint, his face expresses anger bordering on fury. The attendant's response is a nonchalant one, "So what?" Karol flies into a rage and mounts an argument, in French, that the attendant cannot rebuke – he gives Karol his money back. It is a small moment of victory for Karol: although emotionally shattered, he musters enough resolve to translate his rage into comprehensible French. The viewer, however, is painfully aware that Karol gets a reaction from the attendant only because he finally allows his "foreign body" to perform. He looks threatening! Still, he is heard (or rather seen) and receives what he asked for.

This moment within the narrative marks a turning point, and the two-franc coin is a material reminder of the shift in Karol's social status. From now on he will accrue capital and eventually have his ex-wife come and ask for reconciliation. He saves the coin as a trophy of this initial symbolic endowment. After returning to Poland, Karol

diligently continues to learn French. He spends evenings on cleaning up his accented pronunciation. One scene shows him going through drill exercises, aided by a language instruction recording. One guesses that he makes this kind of effort to take his revenge on Dominique in style. But the film pays explicit attention to language as an important factor in the remaking of identities in the integrating Europe, and in this context Karol's ambition to achieve linguistic prowess in a Western language is a logical step in his drive to hold his share of the European cultural capital.

So how does Karol make his fortune? Upon his return to Warsaw, he moves in with his brother (Jerzy Stuhr), who is also a hairdresser, although of a lesser caliber (Karol is the one who won international contests and who is sought after by his brother's female clientele once they find out Karol is back in Warsaw). Karol receives a warm welcome and tender care, which he needs after being manhandled at the dump. His brother, a nurturing, somewhat effeminate character feeds Karol chicken soup and allows him to sleep off his injuries. Soon Karol is well but not ready to step into his old shoes of a small time craftsman. He has consciously ended that chapter of his life back in Paris, when he tossed all of his professional credentials (hairdresser's license, diplomas, award certificates, etc.) onto the metro tracks. Co-owning his family's hair salon will not supply the kind of money and clout that Karol desires. Although running a small business figured in the post-Soviet reality (and cinema) as the surest way to capitalist transformation, Karol's entrepreneurial choices go beyond the small-scale privatization and represent the aggressive economic practices of the international free market capitalism.

Karol becomes a bodyguard to a man who deals in currency exchange, money laundering, loans, and unspecified monetary operations, all of which qualify him as essentially a criminal. One day Karol's boss takes him on an outing during which Karol overhears his boss and another man discuss buying out land from small farmers with the hope of reselling it for exorbitant price to Hartwig and IKEA, foreign corporations that might be looking for storage space around Warsaw. Since the lead is based solely on a stranger's word of mouth, Karol's boss is not eager to invest and plays down the whole idea. The two men decide to wait a while. Karol, on the other hand, acting behind their backs, decides to follow up on the lead immediately. Cunningly, he purchases only a few tiny plots of land, but he makes sure that these plots are strategically spread out through the area that the corporations might be interested in. When the time comes, the two criminals realize that they cannot buy out the entire section of land from the naïve farmers because someone else has beaten them to it. Eventually they must pay Karol off. Thus Karol comes into an almost instantaneous fortune by manipulating information and using his wit to secure a profitable position for himself in the semi-legal free market economy.

It is not accidental that Kieślowski has Karol make his money through a land transaction that involves foreign companies. During the early 1990s, most East Central European governments were immersed in debates over land ownership rights available for foreign investors, as well as emotionally charged disputes over the land illegally annexed by communists that was being reclaimed by various private individuals (Germans, Americans and Israelis), after the concept of private property in the region became once again a reality. Karol's participation in the underhanded sale of Polish land

to foreign corporations takes on an ambivalent tone in the film. One cannot dismiss him easily as another swindler. As a victimized protagonist, he elicits sympathy and audience identification. The motive behind his actions is passion for a woman, not greed. He buys from the farmers the absolute minimum that he needs to manipulate the criminals. Ethically, he treads the grey zone of neither protecting the local interests nor fully cooperating with the foreign agents of corporatism. In *Karol*, Kieślowski creates a character who serves both as a model East Central European who knows how to achieve financial success outside of the socialist safety net (we admire his gumption and timing) and as a businessman tainted with dubious trading practices (free of criminal intent). He is the new hero for the new era, very different from the heroes who populated the cinema of moral concern of the previous decades, or even Kieślowski's own *Decalogue*.

*White* was able to deliver such a multifaceted appraisal of the situation in the integrating Europe of the early 1990s largely because it is a product of transnational filmmaking. The mode and means of production, both French and Polish, involved in making of this film allowed for the picture to avoid one-directional representation of the political and economic changes taking place at the time that a purely national, state-subsidized mode would have necessarily entailed. The film does not uniformly point a finger at Western Europe as the perpetrator of injustice and East Central Europe as its victim. The scenario depicted here is much more complex, and in the end *White* builds a solid bridge between the two disparate sides of Europe, while simultaneously inspecting the differences, some of which turn out to be insurmountable.

The international transfers in production, distribution and consumption of film in contemporary Europe are relegated to their own clandestine sphere, especially in the area



of film studies and the research paradigms employed by scholars. European cinema continues to be studied as a collection of national cinemas. International European cooperation is shunned on the basis of an assumption that as such it brings the filmmaking model too close to the Hollywood, profit-driven practices, bent on delivering a product that will have to please everyone. The critics of this trend talk about the McDonaldization of the film market. The fact remains, however, that despite this concerted opposition, European cinema has developed a distinct transnational perspective, both in film content and the modes of production, distribution and consumption. This development reflects not only the economic shift towards globalization in Europe, but also a new universal phenomenon in which the most recent technology, and the aesthetics that it enables, is shaping contemporary culture. Randall Halle best diagnoses the change:

As the emergence of print culture facilitated the emergence of the nation-state, contemporary communications media are facilitating the current transnational shift. In this process, film is the most significant marker of the simultaneous economic and cultural transformations. Film is the so-called 'software' in the rapidly transforming audio-visual media. Without having to engage in geopolitical negotiations, the ideational borders of the nation-states are being redrawn through new production, distribution, and screening policies. (7)

In transnational film, the cinematic spectacle becomes the nexial territory: the place where connections are not only imagined but visualized. In European cinema, international co-productions have the potential to confront the three existing filmmaking paradigms (and the value systems that these paradigms promote): the high art cinema

traditionally linked with the European directors, the Hollywood populist model based on narrative entertainment, and the indigenous cinema (Third Cinema) that often limits the content to national politics.

Arguably, today, transnational cinema is the fastest developing trend in film art worldwide. It has little allegiance to state boundaries. And it benefits from the free market production and distribution methods. Transnational film utilizes cinema's ability to de-territorialize and mobilize reality in its project of creating watchful travelogues—films that chart the fluidity of space, time, and identity in today's reality, often portraying a traveling narrative, itinerant camera, and cultural interconnectedness. The recent films that have a clear transnational perspective, working against and within the Hollywood system, are *Babel* (2006, dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu), *Blood Diamond* (2006, dir. Edward Zwick), *Children of Men* (2006, dir. Alfonso Cuarón), *The Constant Gardener* (2005, Fernando Meirelles), *Syriana* (2005, dir. Stephen Gaghan), and *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002, dir. Stephen Frears). Some of these films have bigger, some lesser Hollywood budgets, some are directed by cultural outsiders – immigrant directors – some by established Western artists, but all of them carry on the task of questioning the discourse of national containment. These films consciously take on the problems of migration, international trade, Third World economic crises, human rights violations, and in general the growing disparity between the “haves” and “have-nots” of today's world.

In the European context, politically and socially engaged transnational cinema still receives only marginal attention, precisely because it builds a case against the national containment. Although the free market economy has minimized the state subsidy system in most European film industries, and the state is no longer in a position “to serve

as the guardian of cultural (and social) welfare,” the idea of statehood is pivotal in most cultural expressions formed in Europe (Halle 14). On the other side of the spectrum, there is the category of films that minimize the national for the sake of the generic “European” – the so-called “Europudding” of the 1990s.<sup>50</sup> These are films that avoid themes of real historical importance, and instead transform all national specificity and historical detail into watered down sense of “old-worldness.” “In the narrative logic of the films, it was as if the representation of national particularity had to be disrupted or counteracted. Such films sought a trans-European audience by relying on scripts that removed cultural considerations and avoided national conflicts” (Halle 33). In these films, ethnicity is either completely erased or transformed into a caricature that adds ethnic flavor to the otherwise bland mix. The films are usually studded with European stars, scripted and filmed in English, and they rely on the generic conventions of melodrama. One assumes that the target audience for this kind of product is found among the international viewers who crave “Europe” in a capsule form. They also have been heavily promoted by the EU as an art form that consolidates the integrated European identity.

In the most recent years, however, Europudding has been slowly but firmly pushed out of the spotlight by a different kind of co-production, in which filmmakers, producers, actors and writers cross the borders precisely to be able to express a truth about a local situation that could not be otherwise fully and objectively expressed due to political pressures exacted by a given national film industry and the state that it

---

<sup>50</sup> Good examples of Europudding would be *The King’s Whore* (1990, dir. Axel Corti), *Voyager* (1991, dir. Volker Schlöndorff), *Dr. M* (1990, dir. Claude Chabrol), *Mister Frost* (1990, dir. Philippe Setbon), *Barnabo of the Mountains* (1994, dir. Mario Brenta), *Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin* (1994, dir. Jiri Menzel), *Bitter Moon* (1992, dir. Roman Polanski). Many of these co-productions were directed by *auteurs*, who unfortunately were not able to rise above the market demand and production pressures.

represents. One such truth has been told by two excellent examples of socially aware transnational filmmaking: *Lilja 4Ever* (2002, dir. Lukas Moodysson) and *Your Name Is Justine* (2005, dir. Franco de Peña). In both cases East Central Europeans cooperated with their Western European colleagues to tell the story of the new kind of clandestine transfer of humans, proliferating throughout Europe today. This kind of transfer is darker and more damaging in consequences than even the tragic escapes from the communist countries of the decades past. The two films provide fictionalized accounts of the sex trafficking industry that supplies the brothels of Western Europe (but also the United States, the Middle East and many Asian countries) with human merchandise from East Central Europe, zooming in specifically on the enslavement aspect of the industry.

*Lilja 4Ever* was directed by a Swede – Lukas Moodysson, shot on location in Estonia, with the contribution from Russian and Estonian actors. The film was financed by producers from Sweden and Denmark.. It tells the story of a sixteen-year old Lilja who one day discovers that her mother has just become a mail-order bride for some American and is moving to the US, leaving Lilja behind to a life of certain poverty and potential abuse. Lilja lives in some small town in the post-Soviet Estonia, where unemployment is rampant and crime high. Soon, in quick succession, Lilja is ousted by her greedy aunt from the decent apartment that the girl used to share with her mother, has to move to a cold, one-room space without electricity, and finds out that her mother has renounced (by proxy) her guardianship over Lilja. Lilja's only consolation comes from her friendship with a much younger boy, Volodja, who is beaten and neglected by his parents, and who seems to cling to Lilja for even the smallest amount of affection she can spare. The narrative spends a significant amount of time illustrating the hopelessness of

life and the nonexistence of future prospects for these two young people who are falling through the cracks of Estonia's transformation into capitalism.

Lilja and Volodja numb the pain of missed opportunities by sniffing glue. Still, they share a dream of escaping the life of misery. Volodja dreams of making it to heaven, where, he believes, he would be allowed to play basketball all day long, and Lilja is still hoping to join her mother in the US. So when Andrei, a young and seemingly well-intentioned man, comes along wooing Lilja with promises of love and life in Sweden, she wants to trust him. Andrei, on his part, goes into considerable effort to earn the girl's trust. He courts her, takes her out to dinner, to an amusement park, for walks, etc. Because of the bond carefully built by Andrei, the girl is unsuspecting when on the day of their planned departure for Sweden Andrei suddenly pulls out and has her take the trip alone. Upon her arrival in Sweden, Lilja is met at the airport by Andrei's friend, who soon turns out to be Andrei's business associate (a Polish thug, who alternates between broken English and curse-ridden Polish when he addresses Lilja), the business being international prostitution slave trade. Lilja is locked up in a desolate apartment, in a remote suburb of an undisclosed Swedish city, and forced to deliver sex services to Swedish men of all walks of life, day in and day out. Lilja is beaten, raped and starved routinely to ensure her cooperation. Eventually, when the long-awaited opportunity of escape materializes, Lilja, whose identity has long been shattered, uses it to jump to her death.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Moodysson's film was inspired by a true story of Dangoule Rasalaite, a sixteen-year old Lithuanian girl who came to Sweden in 1999, on a counterfeit passport, to take up work on a vegetable farm, but instead she was abducted and forced into prostitution. A few months later she managed to flee the place of her captivity and committed suicide by jumping off a road bridge in Malmö.

The film opens up and closes with the same scene of a girl (Lilja) lost on a highway. She seems to be disoriented and scared. She is moving haphazardly, frantically switching between running and walking. Lilja in this scene is the antithesis of Lola, the character from Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1998), whose mobility signifies control over space and her environment. Unlike Lilja, Lola runs with a clear purpose to save her boyfriend. She runs through the streets of Berlin, the city that she knows well and rightfully inhabits. Lola's bodily stance is that of empowerment: the techno beat emphasizes the pulse of her strong body put in motion. Her red hair and the upper-body musculature radiating athletic beauty are signs of liberated femininity. In contrast to Lola, Lilja is traversing foreign space, without any clear direction. Her body is battered; her face wears signs of exhaustion and psychological turmoil. The smooth and uninterrupted flow of traffic on the highway – hundreds of cars zooming by at high speed – underscores the girl's displacement and distress. Despite the fact that she is in close proximity to a major urban artery, a means of conduit and connectivity for the metropolitan inhabitants, her entrapment could not be more pronounced. A pedestrian is an alien in this part of the city's infrastructure.<sup>52</sup> As the narrative unfolds, the viewer realizes that Lilja has become an illegal alien, hunted by her slave driver and the Swedish immigration authorities.

This scene frames the entire picture as an expression of limited female mobility in the united Europe, both in the sense of traversing space and moving up a social ladder. Leaving home for many Europeans, especially women from the poorer EU countries, brings a sudden and unexpected degradation of their already compromised condition.

---

<sup>52</sup> Over the last two decades, these alien pedestrians became ubiquitous components of any metropolitan landscape. In the US context, they are most often the illegal immigrants from behind the Mexican border, each morning making their way to work on foot (or using a bicycle) along the side of a highway. Their status as pedestrians tells the story of disenfranchisement, poverty, and physical danger – conditions resulting from being trapped in the permanent state of illegal alienage.

Lilja's dreams of international travel turn into a nightmare. Eventually, she finds herself stranded on the side of a highway, in the physical space that hundreds of East Central European women occupy daily in an effort to make a living as *tirówki*, highway prostitutes servicing truckers at rest stops (the first three letters of the word stand for T.I.R. – Transport International de Route, i.e. trucks transporting commercial goods across Europe). The *tirówki* women, however, navigate the highway as their workplace. Although forced by dire economic conditions to take up prostitution, these are women who retain their basic physical freedom. Their tragic fate is still somewhat better than the lot of sex slaves, such as Lilja. In *Lilja 4Ever*, the highway is neither the road to liberation from the constraints of domesticity (a common trope in road movies) nor the route of escape from her previous state of captivity. The highway leads Lilja to death: she jumps off an overpass.

Another recent co-production, *Your Name Is Justine* (2005), examines the workings of international sex trafficking in the same East Central European context, but delivers a more positive ending. The film was directed and co-written by a cultural outsider, a Venezuelan who made his home in Poland – Franco de Peña.<sup>53</sup> It tells a story of a Polish girl, Mariola, who lives with her grandmother in a small town where the only employer is the local meat factory. Mariola is not destitute like Lilja, but her life is unpromising and the atmosphere in the small town stifling. One day, a friend from her childhood returns to town. He has been living in Germany ever since his parents decided

---

<sup>53</sup> Franco de Peña came to Poland to study film directing in the Łódź Film School. He then married a Polish woman and settled in Poland. Already in film school, he began researching the illegal trade in female flesh. After eight years of compiling data, interviewing the victims and perpetrators involved in the trade, and securing international funding for the project, de Peña made a full length feature film based on his findings. The character of Mariola is a composite of six women who experienced sex slavery. De Peña met two of the six women personally. He learned about the fate of the other four from telephone interviews and police reports. Three of the six women did not survive the ordeal.

to emigrate. Artur is now a good looking and successful young man. Mariola falls in love, and soon Artur wants to take her on a short vacation to visit his parents in Berlin. Mariola is thrilled about the prospect of meeting his parents, but even more so about the idea of getting a break from her mundane reality. The two plan to take a non-stop drive to Berlin, but at the last minute Artur changes his mind and, soon after having crossed the border, decides to stop over at his friend's house to get some rest. Once they enter the house, we see Artur receive a large amount of money and quickly disappear. Confused, Mariola screams for help and begs for an explanation. Three strangers speaking German enter the scene and proceed to humiliate Mariola, a first step in a series of abuses meant to break her into submission. They take her passport away and order her to strip, so that they can inspect the human merchandise they have just purchased.

As it turns out, Mariola has been sold as a sex slave to a German prostitution ring. From now on, she will be kept in total isolation in an empty apartment, located in an old, abandoned townhouse. Unlike Moodysson's scrutinizing study of poverty in the post-Soviet Baltic countries in *Lilja 4Ever*, de Peña's film doesn't dwell on the precise socio-economic conditions that precipitate the trade in human beings, rather it focuses on the master/slave relations involved in sex slavery situation. The important difference between the two films lies in the identity of the master. The Swedish director chose to shift the blame for the existence of slavery in contemporary Europe onto the instability of East Central European economies as well as the greed and criminal mindset of East Central European men. In *Lilja 4Ever*, the oppressors operating on both sides of the East/West divide – the man who sells Lilja into slavery in Estonia and the man who buys her and exploits her in Sweden – are both East Central European men. The Swedish men are



portrayed as harmless and hapless clients, victims of loneliness, dysfunctional marriages, or simply bored men looking for excitement. De Peña, on the other hand, offers a more balanced view of givers and takers implicated in the crime of peddling humans.

Financial backing for *Your Name Is Justine* came from a variety of production funds, both private and public, Western and Eastern, a corporate media mogul (Canal +), Council of Europe's Eurimages, and Polish public television. Three nations were involved in the film's production: Luxemburg, Germany, and Poland. The creative control over the project rested in the hands of a Venezuelan. In this situation, de Peña had to work extra hard to satisfy the disparate political interests of his sponsors and their conflicting appraisals of the responsibility for the situation. But the effort paid off in the multifaceted film that depicts the problem of sex slavery as a burden of the entire Europe, not just an ugly side effect of ailing post-Soviet economies. Interestingly, the film's nomination for the Academy Awards 2006, submitted in the foreign language film category by Luxemburg, was excluded from the competition precisely because of its hybrid production profile. The Academy's rule that governs the foreign film nominations continues to operate within the national cinema paradigm. The rule dictates that the nation submitting the nomination has to be identical to the nation (and nationality) of the agents who held the artistic control over production of the film. Consequently, truly transnational projects coming from Europe have little chance of entering the competition.

One way in which *Your Name Is Justine* strives for an objective portrayal of sex slavery as a phenomenon brought on by globalization is the use of strategic casting. De Peña casts the unknown Polish actors, Anna Cieślak in the role of Mariola and Rafał Maćkowiak as Artur, vis-à-vis the well known faces of Western European cinema: the

French-born German actor Mathieu Carrière and the icon of French cinema: Dominique Pinon. These two well-liked and respected actors play the leaders of an organized crime unit, which facilitates and, in the end, takes the largest chunk of profit from trading bodies for international sex industry. The characters played by these two actors, despite their ruthless criminal objective, exude an air of cultivation and refinement. They are multilingual; they speak English, French and German. In fact, they look and act in a way that makes it possible to envision them as fathers, husbands and educated professionals.

When the criminal played by Mathieu Carrière baptizes Mariola with her trade name – Justine – he is speaking to her in English but pronounces the new name in French. This reference to Marquis de Sade’s fictional character Justine, one of the most famous sex slaves in Western culture, brings to the surface the link between the libertarian traditions of Western Europe, studied in philosophy classes across the world, and the dark legacy of the Enlightenment’s compulsion to imagine the Eastern periphery of Europe as the arena of sexual conquest. Unlike their henchmen who do the raping and the beating of the victims, these two characters are white-collar criminals. They bridge the gap between the East Central European men who methodically and cunningly hunt and sell the unsuspecting women into servitude and the men who receive the services. The characters played by Carrière and Pinon function as mirror reflections of the clients who pursue the services of sex slaves – men who are often upright, benevolent and enlightened members of society. This rhetorical move incriminates the clients who are usually ignored, if not exonerated, in public debates and media coverage on the problem of sex slavery.

Alongside the widespread democratization of Europe and concerted efforts to reunite the two Europes still divided by the legacy of the Iron Curtain, there continues a

proliferation of clandestine passages, whose trajectories run along the lines of global market exchanges. These trajectories contribute to the contraction of one free market and simultaneous increase in distances that separate different members of humanity today. These secret passages testify to a reality much different from the celebratory discourse promoted by the EU administration in Brussels. The Polish Plumber, the Polish hairdresser, and the Polish Justine are all examples of cultural encounters that narrate the merging of Europe and its internal Other in terms of sexual exploitation perpetuated by agents of neo-colonialism whose loyalties are to capital alone.<sup>54</sup> These agents are both Western and Eastern, well educated and illiterate, working outside of the legal realm as well as from within the EU legislature. From this perspective, the enemies who fought the Cold War seem like members of the gentlemen's club.

European transnational cinema, itself a product of globalizing market economy, is best equipped to document and critique the rifts in the transition process. By zooming in on local sites of transformation and paying close attention to the exact, material conditions of represented reality, always in the context of international relations, transnational cinema bypasses the national ideology in its choice of content or form, and in the methods of theorizing that it engenders.

---

<sup>54</sup> In addition to the plumber poster, the Polish Tourist Organization issued a number of other posters, all featuring young, attractive models in various stages of undress, luring foreigners to visit Poland. The nurse poster showed a coquettishly posed woman, sporting a nurse uniform à la Fredrick's of Hollywood, with a caption that read "I'm awaiting you."

## Epilogue

*Roots* (1977), the American TV series – an adaptation of Alex Haley’s saga about Black Americans coming to terms with their tragic heritage of slavery and disenfranchisement – was purchased by communist governments and shown throughout the Soviet Block as a document of the capitalist West’s violent and corrupt foundations. During early 1980s, communist-controlled public television stations aired the series in the hope of furthering their own anti-capitalist ideology. Unfortunately for them, the party apparatchiks did not foresee the viewers’ emotional investment in the life of Kunta Kinte and his family. Across East Central Europe people consumed *Roots* as a veiled representation of their own fate. They identified with the Black American slaves as far as their story reflected the subjugation of people by other people. The series contributed to the rising unrest among East Central Europeans, including people who were not involved in oppositional movement, who once again went out to the streets to voice their revulsion against the oppressor. A product of one ideology that was meant to strengthen another ideology, in fact, worked as an expression of anti-ideology sentiments.

I tell this story whenever my idea of conceptualizing East Central Europe in terms of colonialism encounters consternation and resistance. I realize that this resistance comes in response to my race, or what people perceive as my physically-evident racial identity. The whiteness visible in my skin and hair color becomes a trope that blurs the message that I believe I am entitled to communicate.

The subjectivity and consciousness shared by East Central Europeans is closer to the subjectivity cultivated by the colonized than that of the European colonizer. This message unsettles the categories operative in the language of Eurocentrism. The whiteness that I represent stands for both privilege (in many situations it is taken as a marker of agency and thus provides agency) and a history of colonial violation. Nazism and to a far less drastic effect the US immigration policies have questioned the whiteness of Jews, Slavs and Gypsies, therefore exposing whiteness “as a *selective* metacategory that, working through ‘filtering,’ privileges only the most ‘appropriate’ of the white bodies” (Marciniak, “Immigrant Rage” 40). The history of East Central European whiteness is different from the experience of Western European or American whiteness and should be theorized on different terms than the whiteness spoken about by postcolonial scholars. This dissertation was an attempt to sketch out this important difference and begin the work of discussing it as a way out of the somewhat fossilized paradigm of research that guides postcolonial studies today. There are many spaces around the world that do not clearly fall into the First World/Third World dichotomy. By stopping to contemplate those spaces, one can provide an important intervention in discourses of colonialism, racism, and identity politics.

The importance of the sense of place in East Central European culture both allows for and prevents the identification with the situation of Black Americans. East Central European subjectivity has always depended on the idea of rootedness that Black Americans have no easy access to because of the uprootedness that occupies the center of their history. But East Central Europeans have also witnessed a portion of their own population being forced out of their homes, imprisoned and shipped to the death camps.

This experience especially, but also countless programs of forced expatriation that accompanied Western and Eastern acts of territorial aggression in the region, made East Central Europeans particularly appreciative of having a place in the world. The awareness of holding on to this place, however, is always shrouded in a fear of losing it. This strong sense of place has contributed to a production of a vibrant culture despite the extended periods of foreign domination. Once again, I insist on recognizing this version of rootedness-under-erasure as radically different from the unquestioned entitlement to land that fosters imperial attitudes, now widely criticized as a source of the lightheartedness with which America invades foreign territories.

Finally, I used *Peripheral Visions* to delineate consciousness that evolved as a result of deep skepticism that generation after generation of East Central Europeans experienced in response to watching ideals deteriorate into ideology.

To provide a coda to this dissertation, I will relate a story of one such ideal. The colors of my childhood were literally gray, camouflage green and puke brown, as were the colors surrounding children growing up in every country in the Soviet Block. The toys that we played with were as ugly as our drab school uniforms and the tenement buildings that we lived in. So it is no surprise that the arrival of the first Barbie doll in the neighborhood was a religious experience. The doll was smuggled from London by one loving father who was granted the rare opportunity to travel to the West. The first miracle was the fact that the father returned; many did not. The second was the gift he brought back. Soon the news spread and everyone wanted to see the doll that was said to exceed the wildest imagination that communism could spawn. The parents of the lucky girl set visiting hours and we were allowed to take a peek at the miracle, but not touch! The doll

was a thing of beauty, but most importantly it wore the pinkest pink I had ever seen. In fact, it was the first artificially-produced pink piece of material to surface in this part of Poland. This kind of neon pink was simply against everything that communism stood for. The color was illegal because expensive dye and complicated chemical processes went into producing it, something that communist factories were too bankrupt to manufacture at that time. But even if they weren't, they would never waste the manpower or the resources on something so clearly decadent. Ironically, years later I found out that the word "pink" was used in the US as a derogatory term for someone with communist leanings. Neither the word nor the color meant anything in the Soviet Block. It was red or nothing.

After witnessing the miracle, my friends and I created legends about the doll. This coveted object pushed our imagination into uncharted territories until about a decade later when the Barbie doll suddenly turned up in every toy shop in town (the Wall came down). Quickly, it became a common commodity. Everyone owned one, and they all looked the same. After another few years, Polish feminists began writing essays for the Polish edition of *Cosmopolitan* about the adverse effects of the toy upon little girls' body image, while conceptual artists conducted beheadings, surgeries, and public burnings of the cursed thing. One artist has videotaped herself "giving birth" to a Barbie. I think that artist was one of us, touched by the miracle.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread Of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Anna. Dir. Jurek Bogajewicz. Perf. Sally Kirkland, Paulina Porizkova, and Robert Fields. Lions Gate, 1987.
- Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995.
- Balibar, Etienne. "From Class Struggle to Classless Struggle?" *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. Ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein. London: Verso, 1991. 153-183.
- Banner, Gillian. *Holocaust Literature: Schulz, Levi, Spiegelman and the Memory of The Offence*. London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2001.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. "The Making and Unmaking of Strangers." *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*. Ed. Pnina Werbner and Tarig Modood. London: Zed, 1997. 46-57.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- Besemeres, Mary. "Language and Self in Cross-Cultural Autobiography: Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*" *Canadian Slavonic Papers: An Interdisciplinary Devoted to Central and Eastern Europe* 40.3-4 (1998): 327-344.
- Bontempelli, Massimo. "Analogies." *900 (Novecento)* 4 (1927): 7-13.
- Brown, Russell. "Bruno Schulz and World Literature." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 34.2 (1990): 224-246.
- Budurowycz, Bohdan. "Galicia in the Work of Bruno Schulz." *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 28.4 (December 1986): 360-368.
- Casanova, Giacomo. *History of My Life*. Trans. Willard Trask. Vol. 10. London: Longman, 1971.
- Casey, Edward. "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time." *Senses of Place*. Eds. S. Feld and K. Baso. Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1996. 14-51.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and*



- Tragedy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Cornis-Pope, Marcel. "Literary Imagination in the Post-Cold War Era: Developing Alternative Models of Cultural Interaction." *Literary Research/ Recherche littéraire* 18.36 (2001): 389-401.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Deltcheva, Roumiana. "East Central Europe as a Post-Coloniality: The Prose of Viktor Paskov." *Colonizer and Colonized*. Ed. Theo D'haen and Patricia Krüs. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Des Tours de Babel." *Difference in Translation*. Ed. Joseph F. Graham. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. 165-207.
- . "La Loi du genre/The Law of the Genre." *Glyph: Textual Studies* 7(1980): 176-201.
- Durczak, Jerzy. "Multicultural Autobiography and Language: Richard Rodriguez and Eva Hoffman." *Crossing Borders: American Literature and Other Artistic Media*. Ed. Jadwiga Maszewska. Peoria, IL: Polish Scientific, Spoon River Lodz, 1992. 19-30.
- Durovicova, Natasa. "Auditioning for America: Method, Madness and Banality in *Anna*." *Before the Wall Came Down: Soviet and East European Filmmakers Working in the West*. Eds. Graham Petrie and Ruth Dwyer. Lanham: University Press of America, 1990. 115-123.
- Eurimages. European Cinema Support Fund. The Council of Europe. 13 March 2007  
<[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/eurimages/About/default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/eurimages/About/default_en.asp)>.
- Eyal, Gil, Iván Szelényi and Eleanor Townsley. *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Ficowski, Jerzy. *Regions of Great Heresy: Bruno Schulz, a Biographical Portrait*. Trans. and ed. Theodosia Robertson. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003.
- Foster, John Burt. "Magical Realism, Compensatory Vision, and Felt History: Classical Realism Transformed in *The White Hotel*." Zamora and Faris. 267-283.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. New

- York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Garton Ash, Timothy. *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Grocholska, Julitta. "Polish Immigration to the U.S." *Polonia Today Online*. 1999. Polonia Media Network. 4 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.poloniatoday.com/Immigration1.htm>>.
- Guenther, Irene. "Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic." Zamora and Faris. 33-73.
- Halle, Randall. "German Film, Aufgehoben: Ensembles of Transnational Cinema." Spec. issue of *New German Critique* 87 (2002): 7-46.
- Haltof, Marek. *Polish National Cinema*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2002.
- Hester Street*. Dir. Joan Micklin Silver. Perf. Carol Kane, Doris Roberts, Steven Keats, And Mel Howard. Homevision, 1975.
- Hoffman, Eva. *Lost in Translation*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Huggan, Graham. "Decolonizing the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and The Cartographic Connection." *Ariel* 20.4 (October 1989): 115-131.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Circling the Downspout of Empire: Post-colonialism and Postmodernism." *Ariel* 20.4 (1989): 149-75.
- Imre, Anikó. "Gender, Literature, and Film in Contemporary East Central European Culture." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal*. 3.01. Purdue University Press. 11 Nov. 2005 <<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb01-1/imre01-1.html>>.
- . Introduction. *East European Cinemas*. Ed. Imre. New York: Routledge, 2005. xi-xxvi.
- Iordanova, Dina. *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*. London: Wallflower Press, 2003.
- Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Routledge, 1981.
- James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Ed. Ralph B. Perry. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Modernism and Imperialism." *Nationalism, Colonialism, and*

- Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990. 43-66.
- . "On Magic Realism in Film." *Critical Inquiry* 12, 2 (1986): 301- 325.
- . *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Jouen, Marjorie, and Catherine Papat. "Social Europe in the Throes of Enlargement." *Notre Europe* 15 (July 2005): 16.
- Kafka, Franz. *The Complete Stories*, Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.
- Karpinski, Eva C. "Negotiating the Self: Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and the Question of Immigrant Autobiography." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 28.1 (1996): 127-35.
- Kieślowski, Krzysztof. *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*. Ed. Danusia Stok. London: Faber and Faber, 1993.
- Kieślowski, Krzysztof, and Krzysztof Piesiewicz. *Three Colours Trilogy: Blue, White, Red*. Trans. Danusia Stok. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Bulgaria, my Suffering." *Crisis of the European Subject*. Trans. Susan Fairfield. New York: Other Press, 2000. 165-183.
- . "From Filth to Defilement." *Portable Kristeva*. 248-263.
- . "Negativity: Rejection." *Portable Kristeva*. 70-92.
- . *Portable Kristeva*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- . "Toccata and Fugue for the Foreigner." *Portable Kristeva*. 264-282.
- Kundera, Milan. "The Tragedy of Central Europe." *The New York Review of Books* 31.7 (26 April 1984): 33-38.
- Lippard, Lucy. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicultural Society*. New York: The New Press, 1997.
- Marciniak, Katarzyna. "Immigrant Rage: Alienhood, "Hygienic" Identities, and the Second World." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17 (2006): 33-63.
- . "Second World-ness and Transnational Feminist Practices: Agnieszka Holland's

- Kobieta Samotna (A Woman Alone)*. *East European Cinemas*. Ed. Anikó Imre. New York: Routledge, 2005. 3-20.
- Mazierska, Ewa. "Between the Sacred and the Profane, the Sublime and the Trivial: The Magic Realism of Jan Jakub Kolski." Jan. 2000. *An Online Journal of Film Studies*. 22 Oct. 2003 <[http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/articles/jan\\_jakub\\_kolski.htm](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/articles/jan_jakub_kolski.htm)>.
- Mazierska, Ewa, and Laura Rascaroli. *Crossing New Europe: Postmodern Travel and the European Road Movie*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006.
- Miłosz, Czesław. "Central European Attitudes." *In Search of Central Europe*. Ed. George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989. 116-124.
- . *The History of Polish Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- Miyoshi, Masao. "A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation-State." *Global Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 78-106.
- Moscow on the Hudson*. Dir. Paul Mazursky. Perf. Robin Williams, Maria Conchita Alonso, Cleavant Derricks, and Elya Baskin. Sony Pictures, 1984.
- Naficy, Hamid. "Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre." *Global Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 119-144.
- Nuremberg Trial Proceedings*. The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. Sec. 576. 20 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/imt/proc/12-14-45.htm>>.
- Oliver, Kelly. *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*. Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1993.
- Ostrowska, Elżbieta. "Between Fear and Attraction: Images of Other Women." *Women in Polish Cinema*. Ed. Ewa Mazierska and Elżbieta Ostrowska. New York: Berghahn Books, 2006. 156-81.
- Paloff, Benjamin. "Who Owns Bruno Schulz?" Dec. 2004/ Jan. 2005. *Boston Review*. 11 Feb. 2005 <<http://www.bostonreview.net/BR29.6/paloff.html>>.
- Proefriedt, William A. "The Immigrant or 'Outsider' Experience as Metaphor for Becoming an Educated Person in the Modern World: Mary Austin, Richard Wright and Eva Hoffman." *Melus: The Journal of the Society for the Study of*

*Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 16. 2 (1989-1990): 77-89.

Prokopczyk, Czeslaw. Ed. *Bruno Schulz: New Documents and Interpretations*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.

Richardson, William. *Anecdotes of the Russian Empire in a Series of Letters Written a Few Years Ago, from St. Petersburg*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1968.

Roh, Franz. "Magical Realism: Post-Expressionism." Trans. Wendy B. Faris. Zamora and Faris 15-31. Trans. of *Nach-Expressionismus. Magischer Realismus. Probleme der neusten Europäischen Malerei*. Leipzig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1925.

Schulz, Bruno. *The Collected Works of Bruno Schulz*. Ed. Jerzy Ficowski. Trans. Celina Wieniawska. London: Picador, 1998.

---. *The Street of Crocodiles*. Trans. Celina Wieniawska. New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1977.

Scott, Tim. "Kolski at the Cambridge Film Festival Part 1." 1996. *Jan Jakub Kolski Homepage*. 23 May 2005 <<http://www.estiej.republika.pl/ekolskiatcambridge.htm>>.

Scribner, Charity. *Requiem for Communism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003.

Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse." Zamora and Faris. 407-426.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995. 24-28.

---. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987. 271-315.

Stasiuk, Andrzej. *Jadąc do Babadag*. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2004.

*The Tenant*. Dir. Roman Polanski. Perf. Roman Polanski, Isabelle Adjani, Melvyn Douglas. Paramount Pictures, 1976.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans.

- Richard Howard. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975.
- Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Comparative Cultural Studies and the Study of Central European Culture." *Comparative Central European Culture*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2001. 1-32.
- Trois Couleurs: Blanc (White)*. Dir. Krzysztof Kieślowski. Perf. Zbigniew Zamachowski, Julie Delpy, Janusz Gajos, and Jerzy Stuhr. Miramax. 1994.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974.
- Voltaire. *Documents of Catherine the Great: The Correspondence with Voltaire and the Instruction of 1767*. Ed. W.F. Reddaway. New York: Russell & Russell, 1971.
- Wandycz, Piotr S. *The Price of Freedom: A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976.
- White, Hayden. "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation." *Critical Inquiry* 9 (1982): 113-137.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Wolff, Larry. *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Young, David, and Keith Hollaman. Introduction. *Magical Realist Fiction: An Anthology*. Ed. Young and Hollaman. New York: Longman, 1984. 1-10.
- Zaborowska, Magdalena J. *How We Found America: Reading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris, eds. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995.