

## Science-fiction Plots as an Allegory of Totalitarian Society and State in Cinematography of the Late Communist Poland

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**Abstract:** The 1970's and 1980's are known in the Polish cinematography not only as the period of famous productions of the "cinema of moral concern" and brilliant comedies written and directed by Stanisław Bareja. During that period many films of specific Polish science-fiction style, whose action took place in a near future, were created. They formed an opportunity to create allegories of the totalitarian state, which served as a method of hidden criticism of the communist society ruled in the authoritarian way. Not all of them had equally strong political meaning, but they were always used by their directors as an opportunity to show the forbidden aspect of reality.

**Key words:** science-fiction, Polish Cinematography, Communist Poland

### 1. Introduction

For centuries societies used allegory to express their fears, needs, and dreams. This feature was quickly adapted by political opposition, to make people rebel against the dominant power. Also artists used this method, trying to get a listen and discharge social tension. Twentieth-century totalitarian regimes through their censorship and repression apparatuses forced opposition and free-artists to use that method, in a purpose of critic of the system. In post 145 Poland artists, writers and film-makers quickly used this method to speak the truth. As film directors couldn't show reality, they took two forms to search for it: description of the past and description of the future. In the first method they could present recent problems in a hidden way. In the second, they chose science-fiction movies. In the 1970s and 1980s in Poland and all over the world we can observe development of this kind of art, which was very useful and comfortable for interpretation. The society of communist Poland possessed features of totalitarian, authoritarian and liberal societies. This mixture of values was particularly visible in the last two decades of the communist rules, that is why this period will be the field of my analysis.

### 2. Polish Science-fiction Cinematography

In the years 1970-1990 in Poland there were made over a dozen science-fiction films. In most of them we can find the motives of the totalitarian state and society. I would like to concentrate on couple of them.

In *Hydrozagadka* (Hydro-puzzle) (Andrzej Kondratiuk, 1970) (by Andrzej Kondratiuk) we can see a world from comic book. There is a superhero and his nemesis, we have the plot of saving the city and, of course, scenes

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of fights. But this movie is made in the convention of a comedy. And most of all, the society and state are quite typical, we cannot see totalitarian elements.

Situation is totally changing in *Golem* (Piotr Szulkin, 1979), the first film of famous tetralogy by Piotr Szulkin. The reality of the film is strictly totalitarian. The citizens live in a permanent fear. The totalitarian reality is showed in a metaphor of clones: the creatures without characters and personality, totally dependent on the state. The main hero, Pernat, turns out to be a clone of a death man. For the whole time he is looking for himself, having problems with his own identity. At the end, he himself is a matrix for the next *Golem*, mythical creature formed by mud. Watching this interesting movie, we can have the impression that reality is one big metaphor for an authoritarian state. The state creates this cruel project, without troubling itself by its inhuman consequences. The program works by catching degenerated men and experimenting on them to improve their personality. The hero is being invigilated all the time. The world around him is riled by “doctors” and their spies.

Hanna Książek-Kunicka thinks that the world showed in this motion picture has two separated platforms: demoralized rests of social life and totalitarian power. For instance, the hospital, where the experiments take place, serves also as the prison. Above all, the tool of violence is a knowledge itself. The quasi-totalitarian reality is being seen also in the example of characters. They lost their subjectivity, like mythical golems. As far as Jan Słodowski is concerned: “Incrediblesigestive vision of the inhuman world, where existence was deprived from values and reduced to automatic gestures of satisfying basic needs” (H. Książek-Kunicka, 1980, p. 13).

Anti-thesis of the totalitarian state is the surface of the earth. Characters know about its existence, moreover they try to get over on it. But on the surface everything is directed to.

Another interesting motive is in the scene, where we can see a concert in an amphitheatre. The main character goes on the surface, where he can see an artist, which sings for the empty stadium. Television is creating an effect of a full stadium. It is an interesting allegory of communist propaganda in the media. In the final scene there is a third Oregon, which can be seen in the uniform of a dictator. He denies that there have ever been any experiments creating the golems. This is another example of lie, this time from the top of authorities. It is the power that decides what is fiction, and what is true. In this context authority legitimizes itself.

Another movie from Szulkin’s tetralogy is *Wojna światów — następne stulecie* (War of the worlds — the next century) (Piotr Szulkin, 1981). It is another motion picture, in which director in a sophisticated way presents Polish reality. The action takes place in 2000, when Poland is invaded by Martians. TV Reporter, Iron Idem takes a desperate try to rescue his wife, kidnapped by the authoritarian state. He loses in all fields and is executed, but in a fictional, television way. The basic motive of the film is a critic of totalitarian state. It was made in the period of the “Solidarity Carnival”. The fictional Polish state, which in many instances is similar to the communist Poland, has rules of illusory legitimization of the power. The foundation of those rules is the brutal police and the TV propaganda, which makes fool of people. The citizens are indoctrinated to share they blood, seemingly voluntary. Everybody lives in fear and lie.

The Martians are a symbol of an outer enemy, *conditio sine qua non* of existence all kinds of totalitarianism. However, taking into account that in the movie there are many plots of friendship with “guest” from the red planet, they could also be a metaphor of Soviet Army in Poland, so-called “The Alien Friends”. The Martians are walking on the streets, they are brutal, but the government does not want to be responsible for their actions. Finely they leave our planet<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Martians are small creatures, with silver skin and high IQ.

Nonetheless an important motive is the world of the hypocritical television, which is represented the main character (in this role Roman Wilhelmi). At the beginning he is a loyal maker of orders from the top. But once the rebellion begins, he doesn't want to read fabricated communications. When he loses his wife, he breaks down. He even tries to speak to the nation live from the screen, but without consequence. He symbolizes a heroic, but doomed to failure, rebel. In that context he is similar to the heroes of the First Solidarity.

One of the most known and one of the best Polish science-fiction movies is *Seksmisja* (Sex-mission) (Juliusz Machulski, 1983) directed by Juliusz Machulski. The most important plot shows a totalitarian society and its mechanisms. The propaganda says to citizens that on the surface of the earth, existence is impossible, which is a lie. The borders with other countries are strictly guarded. Men are a symbol of an enemy, they do not exist in society, but each time they can come back. The headmaster of the underground state is a woman, which in reality is a shy man — full of complexes and probably an impotent. Rules are dictatorship with externals of democracy. In conclusion everything we can see on a screen is an allegory of totalitarian state and society, precisely the communist Poland. We have to remember that the film was made in a period of the martial law in Poland (premiere was, however, later, in 1984). Moreover, men who wake up in this world are an allegory of anti-communist opposition, the fighters for freedom and traditional values.

Let's try to imagine the characteristics of the society in that motion picture. It is pacified and subservient to the authorities. It is divided into two groups, technocrats and historians<sup>2</sup>, competing with each other and strengthening the power of a leader in the name of the rule *Divide et Impera*.

Analyzing the scenes we have to take a look at the trial. Men are prosecuted by the Council, which doesn't know what to do. They defend themselves; say that the history of mankind is a history of men. One of the men denies it saying that "Copernicus was a woman". It is hidden analogy to communist society and the Polish politics of memory. In that discourse the history of capitalism was a history of exploitation, religion was superstition, and the officers in the Katyn Forest were murdered by the Germans — that version of history had been taught to the Polish society. Conclusion: each undemocratic power has to falsificate the history.

To the vision of the totalitarian state fit also the Guardians. In some scenes we can observe their behavior, which is aggressive. They use nightsticks, characteristic for the Polish armed police — ZOMO.

The picture also criticizes the luxury of Power. In one of the last scenes the men characters realizes that the dictator is a male. He lives in an unknown house and keeps precious goods. His lifestyle is similar to that of communist authorities, who often against the ideology, had private houses and luxury goods, unthinkable to other citizens.

In quite the same moment of history was made the film *Synteza* (Synthesis) (Maciej Wojtyszko, 1983). It is the second half of XXI century. From hibernation is waking-up the little boy, which had been frozen above hundred years ago. He has understandable problems in adapting to the new situation. Couple days later is waking-up former dictator Muanta, which try to take power on the world, using "the Atrophy virus", after which everybody are totally dominated and manipulated. The main motive is the society of tomorrow. At the beginning we can see liberal democracy as a government of a future. But everything is changing after coup d'état of Muanta. He is trying to compare his new rules to the XX-century dictatorships. He makes believe to people that they have to be happy and obedient. The propaganda slogan is: "Muantu knows what he is doing". In the movie the dictator

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<sup>2</sup> The division on technocrats and historans is wise in cinematography of science-fiction film makers, not only in Poland. For example *Demolition Man* (Marco Brambilla, 1993).

is stylized on Latin-American but of course he fits also into the shoes of General Wojciech Jaruzelski.

Another interesting issue comprises “ideal people”. Thanks to the manipulation in genetics it is possible to create perfect human beings who are socially maladjusted. An example of this is a character (in that role Krystyna Janda), who shows an actress of the future, which hates critics and is hardly self-righteous. Like the local poet says, even perfect world has its disadvantages.

The other motives are robots. They are everywhere, helping people, but sometimes they limit freedom of the human beings. It seems that the director warns in this way about giving the main power into hands of a machines (like in western Si-Fi, for example Terminator).

One of the most important scenes and dialogues is judgment to the Muanta. The dictator defends himself saying that order is the most important as the only way to prevent chaos. One of the Judges (played by Bogusław Linda) says, that human is most important value, non the authoritarian law, which passing by after liquidation of the dictator.

Obi-oba: koniec cywilizacji (Piotr Szulkin, 1984). Another film directed by P. Szulkin. In my opinion better than the previous one. After the atomic war 1000 of people are covering underground, in the dome. They create here new society with all its divisions and with dictatorship. Everybody lives in a dream of coming the mythical ark, the symbol of salvation. Dome is a metaphor of dictatorship and is very similar to polish one. We have here regulation of food, propaganda, anti-government opposition, black trade markets, prostitution, etc. Everybody knows that dome is bursting at the seams and it can't hold them. Like in 80's in Poland, society knew that system is collapsing and was afraid of it. The ark is a metaphor of hope, but could be also metaphor of religion, truth, everything which is lack in totalitarian state. It could symbolize outer free world.

In attention disserves also the character of the Fridgeman. It is another person, which all days waiting for a coming of a mythical ark. He has his own idea how to survive, so he is constructing a giant fridge, which has to be a shelter to survivors. He is collecting food and drink, praying to the ark.

Another symbolic character is library man. In his library are only books about “Burs”, mythical enemies of mankind. The rest of the books were being transfer and is added to the free food given by authorities to the people. Even Bible has lost. Only its caver have being save, because, according to library man words, it can be put on the shelf no one will see what's inside. The most important thing is guises, form, not the contents.

The character of dictator is sitting all days in his bunker – bureau laying his little soldiers. He plots intrigues and managing everyone's from the top. He is lonely and unhappy; he is suffering on persecution mania and the God complex. In real is an old, scared man, drinking alcohol watching in mirror.

Another interesting character in this movie is the tramp. This person resigns from his dignity, only to get some extra food. For meat he is even ready to bark like a dog. He symbolizes a social group, which in each political system sacrifices everything for material goods.

Specific Polish science fiction movie of the late 1980's is Pan Kleks w Kosmosie (Mr. Kleks in Space) (Krzysztof Gradowski, 1988). It is the last part of the adventures of the eccentric Ambroży. This time he travels with a young boy, his father and “Melo Śmiacz” to the Mango planet to rescue a princess. As for many others before, also for this intrigue is responsible The Great Electronic.

What is specific in narration is loneliness of heroes. We can't see any marriages. Men and women are living separately. Even Commander Benson with his son live in a house without any woman. The only marriage-motive is an arranged relationship between Carmello and little Agnes. Maybe the producers want us to focus on the progressive crisis of the family?

Like in the previous parts, we can see here a society ruled in an authoritarian way. An example could be a school class of the future. Its organization is highly restricted. Computers are interfering even in the outer school life of our heroes. Also in the song accompanying the school scenes we can hear that discipline is the foundation of education. In a little way it is a reflection of the school in the late communist Poland where children could neither count on high freedom or liberality.

Just like in most undemocratic regimes, Benson is first promoted only to be demoted later. From the narration we know that the Commander is a victim of interpersonal intrigues within the apparatus of power. It could be a metaphor for games inside the party in communist Poland and politics in military, where single human being wasn't important for the High Commands.

The third film of Szulkin – *Ga Ga: Chwała bohaterom* (Szulkin – *Ga Ga: Glory to the Heroes*) (Piotr Szulkin, 1985) is also full of allegories, metaphors and symbols. In its vision of the world there is common wellness and nobody wants to conquer a space. That is why the program of prisoners exists — astronauts sent on other planets against their will. One of them, named Scope, is sent to the mysterious planet of Australia 458. On its surface he is welcomed as a hero but... he has to commit a crime and has to be executed for it, to the joy of the crowds. Cosmic Australia is a little bit like a totalitarian state, a little bit like the capitalistic West. Like the first one because state intervenes in everything; the second one, cause cruelty is a consumer goods to sell. In bars we can eat a hotdog with human finger inside, and people all the time are exiting of cruelty and violence. Everywhere we can see English words, and it could suggest that maybe is an image of America in the future. On the other hand we can observe a massive event in the typical communist style. Concluding, the world of this fictional planet is an extreme allegory of communist dictatorships, an extreme vision of “dictatorship of money”, which turns people into beasts.

I would like to concentrate on a very specific but important motive: the idea (the concept) of a Hero. The Hero is from one hand a typical socialist worker from the propaganda posters, an important element of communist propaganda, but on the other hand he is a combination of Clyde Barrow and Charles Manson. His like one icon connecting the elements of communist values and capitalist values. Both types are important to each power. Firstly, state prompting them to acts and then punish and liquidate to show the machine of justice and social order. This procedure guarantees obedience of a society.

*Kingsajz* (Juliusz Machulski, 1983) was the film as popular in Poland as *Seksmisja*. It is made more in the convention of fantasy or fairy tale than the typical Si-Fi. This untypical movie presents two realities: casual (king size) and the dwarfs, which is an allegory of totalitarian state and society. Dwarfs live in Dwarfsland, they are existing in society, which is organized from the top, where there are no women and families. The producers smartly cheated censorship of communist Poland showing the regime in fantasy allegory. Dwarfsland is ruled one dwarf with external of democracy. Everybody lives in identical flats (drawers), which symbolized communist flats. Each day is a hard work and gaining luxury goods founded in *Kingsajz*. Of course they symbolize Western consumer goods, which were very difficult to buy in communist states. Dwarfs eat in canteens, which are similar to popular communist milk-bars. The social order is guaranteed by brutal police, which is like the communist militia, aggressive and impolite. In prisons are oppositionists, enemies of the state and... provocateurs (spies of a secret police). In Dwarfsland there exists death penalty which can be observed by any citizen. An opposite world of this land is *Kingsajz*, the world of big human beings, with luxury goods, beautiful women and pleasure. As I have already mentioned it, it symbolizes capitalist countries of the West during the Cold War in comparison to communist ones.

In the introduction to the film *Superwizja* (Supervision) (Robert Gliński, 1990) we can find out that after the success of cable and satellite television, came the time of the Supervision. The phenomenon of it is connected with waves from the screen which stimulate human brain, addicting of it. The society itself can be divided into the minus ones — resistant to that addiction and positive ones — the opposite. The plot of the film takes place in the near future. For sure the main motive is the anticipation of the threat of too big development of technique. The supervision is an allegory of “dream land”, an escape from “grey” reality. But what is this world of close future? Is cruel, uniformed, where society is manipulated by media-bosses, taking efforts from addiction of citizens. Concluding, this vision of producers for sure we can treat as an allegory of totalitarian society and state. Also as a dangerous prophecy.

The main topic of the film is also a threat as a result of the rising technique. The film makers predicted one generation earlier an addiction to the Internet. Supervision is the world where dreams come true, it is a human escape from reality. And people have the reason of escape, because the world is grey and cruel. Even food is uniformed. People are manipulated by a small gang of headmasters who profit from people’s addiction to drugs who take an effort from addiction of drugs. So, it is not only an allegory of a totalitarian state, but also a danger prophecy.

This film ends a Polish group of science-fiction films made in the People’s Polish Republic. Later, the iron curtain fell down and this topic wouldn’t be so tempting to the producers.

### 3. Conclusion

Analyzing movies from the last two decades of a quasi-totalitarian state that was communist Poland, we can group our conclusion in the following points:

Firstly, the majority of polish science-fiction films were deeply connected to current politics and was a specific mirror for the problems of the Polish society. They showed in a vision of tomorrow current issues, criticizing them.

Secondly, they show not only an allegoric vision of their times but also a threat of totalitarian process in general. I do believe that those images and motives were also clear for other non-democratic societies, not only from the Soviet Bloc, but also in other regions, like Latin American or South-East Asian regimes.

Thirdly, they are also concentrated on a critics of the Western societies and its values, especially the “dictatorship of money” and consuming way of life, without deeper sense of existence.

The 1970’s and 1980’s are known in Polish cinematography not only as the period of famous productions of the Cinema of Moral Concern and brilliant comedies written and directed by Stanisław Bareja. During these times many pictures of specific Polish science-fiction style, whose action took place in a near future, were created. They formed an opportunity to create allegories of the totalitarian state, which served as a method of hidden criticism of the communist society ruled in authoritarian way. Not all of them had equally strong political meaning, but they were always used by their directors as an opportunity to show a forbidden aspect of reality. The films I focused on were: *Hydrozagadka*, *Golem*, *Akademia Pana Kleksa*, *Podróże Pana Kleksa*, *Pan Kleks w kosmosie*, *Przyjaciel wesołego diabła*, *Seksmisja*, *Kingsajz*, *Obi oba: koniec cywilizacji* and *Na srebrzystym globie*. I Hope that in my paper I proved that these movies move far beyond being simply si-fi movies and that their metaphoric meaning is not less important than their artistic level.

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