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Polish Postcommunist Cinema and the Neoliberal Order

Images

vol. XI/no. 20

Poznań 2012

ISSN 1731-450X

In 1989 and the early 1990s, state or real socialism (which functioned under many different names, of which ‘crude communism’ is my favourite) was overthrown in a large part of the Soviet bloc, including Poland. At the time, it was not obvious what kind of regime would replace it, but in the light of the fact that the main agent of change was the industrial working class, epitomised by the Solidarity trade union and its leader, Lech Wałęsa, who was himself an industrial worker, there was an expectation that the new system would reward this class. However, ten or so years after the anti-communist revolutions, it is clear that the opposite was the case: working class people and their communities were the main victims of the shift to the new system – neoliberal capitalism or simply neoliberalism.[¹]

My understanding of this system, which was introduced, however unevenly, in the West at the end of the 1970s following the grave problems of so-called embedded liberalism or Keynesianism, and which gained a hegemonic position in the 1990s, mirrors that presented by the Marxist thinker David Harvey in numerous studies, such as *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990), *The New Imperialism* (2003), *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), *The Limits to Capital* (2006) and *The Enigma of Capital* (2010). Harvey describes neoliberalism as a version of capitalism in which capitalists enjoy a high degree of freedom and protection by the state, while labourers are deprived of similar freedoms and state protection. The assumption of neoliberalism, in common with the classical liberalism of Adam Smith, is that its hegemony will lead to the benefit of all: “a rising tide of capitalist endeavour will «lift all boats».”[²] Yet, neoliberalism does not fulfill this promise because it boils down to ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Such accumulation is achieved by: (1) privatisation and commodification of public assets; (2) financialisation, in which any kind of good can be turned into an instrument of economic speculation; (3) the management and manipulation of crises and (4) state redistribution, in which the state becomes an agent of the upward redistribution of wealth, including poor countries subsidising the rich.[³]

[1] M. Burawoy and J. Lukács, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism*, Chicago 1992; D.A. Kideckel, *The Unmaking of an East-Central European Working Class*, in C.M. Hann (ed.), *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, London 2002, pp. 114–132.

[2] D. Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, London 2010, p. 218.

[3] Idem, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford 2005, pp. 160–162.

The third point listed by Harvey, namely embracing crisis and chaos, rather than equilibrium, accounts for the main difference between neoliberalism and classical capitalism. As Melinda Cooper puts it, “What is *neo* about neoliberalism is its tendency to couple the idea of the self-organizing economy with the necessity for continual crisis.”[4] Harvey regards the upward redistribution of wealth and frequent crises as a systemic feature of neoliberalisation, not an unfortunate by-product of the march towards a better world for everybody. As he succinctly puts it: “An ethical, non-exploitative and socially just capitalism that redounds to the benefit of all is impossible. It contradicts the very nature of what capital is about.”[5]

The triumph of neoliberalisation has led to a polarisation of societies into rich and poor, unknown since the time of the greatest economic crisis in the 1930s:

In volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx shows that the closer a society conforms to a deregulated, free-market economy, the more asymmetry of power between those who own and those excluded from ownership of the means of production will produce an ‘accumulation of wealth of one pole’ and ‘accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole’ (*Capital*, vol. 1, p. 645). Three decades of neoliberalization have produced precisely such an unequal outcome. A plausible argument can be constructed, as I sought to show in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, that this was what the neoliberalizing agenda of leading factions of the capitalist class was about from the very outset. Elite elements of the capitalist class emerged from the turmoil of the 1970s having restored, consolidated and in some instances reconstituted the power worldwide.[6]

We find a similar diagnosis in studies devoted to postcommunist Eastern Europe. Their authors argue that the fall of communism allowed for ‘shock therapy’, namely introducing neoliberal rules with even greater speed than in the West. David Kideckel, engaging with the concept of the Eastern European ‘transition’ to the European West, claims that:

I shall argue that the region’s problematic is not too slow a movement to capitalism (as ‘transition’ would have it) but too fast; not too little capitalism, but too much. Rather than postsocialist, it is better understood as ‘neo-capitalist’, a social system that reworks basic capitalist principles in new, even more inegalitarian ways than the Western model from which it derives.[7]

In his discussion of the consequences of capitalism for workers and their families, Karl Marx maintains that that their lives are reduced to a bare minimum, as in this famous fragment on alienation:

[4] M. Cooper, *Life as Surplus. Biotechnology & Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*, Seattle 2008, pp. 43–44.

[5] Harvey, op. cit., p. 239.

[6] Idem, *The Limits to Capital*, New and fully updated edition, London 2006, p. xi.

[7] Kideckel, op. cit., p. 115.

As a result [of working under capitalist condition], man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.[8]

The notion of life reduced to merely physical existence was later elaborated by authors such as Walter Benjamin[9], Hannah Arendt[10], Jacques Rancière[11] and, most importantly from my perspective, Giorgio Agamben in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). According to Agamben, the condition of *homo sacer* is that of a man who is practically without any rights, who can be killed with impunity by a sovereign power. Agamben regards modernity, and especially Nazi Germany, as a hotbed of ‘bare life’, though he does not elaborate on the connection between the production of ‘bare life’ and unrestrained capitalism experienced in the West since the late 1970s, and that existing in the socialist East since the 1990s. However, his examples of violence, drawn from contemporary colonialism, migration and eugenics, clearly point to this link.[12] It could be argued that Keynesianism and state socialism attempted to transform the ‘bare life’ of people deprived of almost everything by the Second World War (which was itself a product of the capitalist crisis of the 1920s and 1930s) and its aftermath, into a ‘good life’, as defined by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*. The production of ‘bare life’ is a consequence of abandoning this project. The owner of ‘bare life’ under neoliberalism finds him/herself in an even more precarious position than Marx’s ‘alienated labourer’. This is because thanks to technological developments the need for work has diminished, leading to increased competition among those at the receiving end of neoliberal policies. Moreover, the global and invisible character of contemporary capitalism makes it more difficult to locate the agents of the oppression of the poor and dispossessed, and hence create strategies to oppose the *status quo*.

Eastern European films and those made elsewhere, but concerning this part of Europe, have documented and commented on phenomena such as the institutional violence accompanying and following deindustrialisation, the fierce competition for scarce opportunities for promotion and survival, and the self-exploitation of one’s body among the poor. Examples include *Elvis and Marilyn* (*Elvjs e Merilijn*, 1998), directed by Armando Manni, *Lilya 4-Ever* (2002), directed by Lukas Moodysson, *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), directed by Stephen Frears, *Spare Parts* (*Rezervni deli*, 2003), directed by Damjan

[8] K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Moscow 1977, p. 71.

[9] W. Benjamin, *Critique of Violence*, in: Idem, *Selected Writings: Volume I*, Harvard 2004.

[10] H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 1951.

[11] J. Rancière, *Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?*, “The South Atlantic Quarterly” 1981, no. 103, pp. 297–310.

[12] G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1998, pp. 109–88.

Kozole, *Emma's Secret* (*Grbavica*, 2006), directed by Jasmila Zbanic, *Iska's Journey* (*Iszka utazása*, 2007), directed by Csaba Bollók and Ulrich Seidl's *Import/Export* (2007).

Polish films are not an exception to this rule, as the phenomena they show are similar to those in the aforementioned films. And yet, their diagnosis and the solutions they propose to the represented problems (or the lack thereof) strike me as different. In the subsequent part of my essay I will examine this Polish specificity, looking at three examples: *Bailiff* (*Komornik*, 2005), directed by Feliks Falk, *Edi* (2002), directed by Piotr Trzaskalski, and *Silesia*, directed by Anna Kazejak-Dawid, which is the first part in the omnibus film *Ode to Joy* (*Oda do radości*, 2005), of which the two remaining parts were directed by Jan Komasa and Maciej Migas. My discussion will foreground the construction of narratives and characters, rather than the aesthetic traits of these films. Yet, similarities in their style are an important reason why they come across as belonging to one wave. Visually, all of them hark back to the 'gritty realism' of the Polish Cinema of Moral Concern of the 1970s, underscoring unattractive aspects of everyday reality by setting the stories in post-industrial landscapes, limiting the use of colour, and a preference for less well known actors. One of the directors of this cluster of films, Feliks Falk, was a leading voice of the Cinema of Moral Concern.

Bailiff: Everybody is guilty

Bailiff premiered sixteen years after communism's collapse in Poland, when the new political and economic system solidified. The film attempts to show its consequences, using as its vehicle a character from a humble background named Lucjan Bohme, who during his climb up the social ladder exposes various types of malaise in the surrounding reality. Lucjan, however, is not an innocent novice who is surprised by the injustice and misery he encounters, but a man who 'sold his soul to the devil' a long time ago.

Falk previously used a similar character in his two best-known films, *Dance Leader* (*Wodzirej*, 1977) and its sequel, *Man of the Year* (*Bohater roku*, 1986). They featured Lutek (diminutive of Lucjan) Danielak, who tries to make a career first in the corrupt 1970s and then in the post-martial law 1980s, which were no less corrupt, only more chaotic. Falk's Danielak could be seen as a living incarnation of late socialism: he takes and pays bribes, acts as a pimp for his girlfriend and prostitutes himself. From time to time, he also has pangs of conscience, but silences them, regarding his misdemeanours as a condition of survival. Danielak, like the final stage of 'real socialism', is also very malleable and social. He tries to adjust to different circumstances and craves popularity – his very profession as a 'dance leader' testifies to this. The people who know him despise him but are able to live with him.

Bailiff's protagonist, Lucjan, suggests that in Poland history repeats itself – a sickness pertaining to late communism is poisoning

Polish society under the postcommunist order. Lutek, however, has matured and has to be treated with respect, which points to an opposite trajectory for history to that offered by Marx: not from tragedy to farce, but from farce to tragedy, where 'tragedy' stands for the capitalism which came to Poland in 1989. Bohme's Germanic surname reflects the fact that *Bailiff* is set in Wałbrzych in Lower Silesia, a town which before the Second World War belonged to Germany, and makes its bearer appear more menacing. Wałbrzych was prosperous during the communist period thanks to its rich seams of coal, but after 1989 it declined, as did other coalmining regions in Eastern Europe.^[13]

Lucjan's profession of bailiff nominally existed in the People's Republic of Poland, but there were fewer bailiffs than after 1989 and their actions were conspicuous due to the ideological dogma that every citizen in a socialist country has the right to a dignified existence free from economic worries. In Polish cinema, the figure of the bailiff was first tackled in the documentary *Office (Urząd)* by Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz, made in 1986, when socialism in Poland was crumbling and filmmakers were more boldly attacking the myth of working people enjoying a decent life in the 'workers' state'. During the postcommunist period, bailiffs cropped up as secondary characters in many films. The figure of the bailiff in postcommunist cinema can be seen as a literalisation of Harvey's idea of neoliberalism as accumulation by dispossession, demonstrating that many must lose in order for one to gain. In *Bailiff* it appears that the loss and punishment suffered by the poor is more important than the resulting gains for the wealthy, as demonstrated by piles of repossessed furniture and household utensils, which had great value for their previous owners but are worthless garbage for those who expropriated them.

The deadly character of a bailiff's actions are nowhere presented more effectively than in the first scene of Falk's film, when Lucjan repossesses life saving machines in a hospital, causing the death of some patients. Lucjan's subsequent decisions have comparable gravity. Determined to prove that the signature of an elderly woman who had taken a bank credit and then disappeared was falsified, he digs up her corpse buried in a field belonging to her family. The discovery ruins the fraudulent family, including a promising footballer, who then commits suicide. The very fact that the family uses the dead to get credit can be linked to the idea of self-exploitation, including the exploitation of the dead, as a means to survive under neoliberalism. Of course, this points to the fact that neoliberalism reduces many people to the position of 'homo sacer'. Lucjan also repossesses the accordion of a disabled child, which is tantamount to causing the girl's 'spiritual death'. Wherever the bailiff appears, he awakens fear and disgust, but nobody can resist his power. On each occasion we see individuals or small groups of people looking passively at him doing his job or

[13] Kideckel, op. cit.

protesting without effect. These images can be viewed as a reflection of the state of the working class after the fall of the Berlin Wall as fragmented, powerless and dispirited.[14]

The difference between the late socialist past and early capitalist present is also reflected in the contrast between Lucjan and his aging mentor, Robert, who is now terminally ill. Robert claims that he was no angel and always worked to have a good life, but that he also respected the need of others to survive. As he says, he would never switch off a life-support machine. Thus, Robert stands for a world which was far from perfect, but bearable and comprehensible. Lucjan represents a new world, which is frightening, abstract and impossible to grasp; which is not even fully understood from within, as demonstrated by the fact that Lucjan cannot explain what prompts him and whom he serves, except for his references to the abstract value of 'keeping his files in order'. The connection of Robert with the old system, and Lucjan with the new one is augmented by the film's casting. Robert is played by Marian Opania, an actor whose popularity was at its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. Falk cast in the role of Lucjan the actor Andrzej Chyra, whose most memorable role prior to *Bailiff* was that of a menacing collector of nonexistent debts in Krzysztof Krauze's *Debt* (*Dług*, 1999), who in the end is killed and dismembered by the men he was tormenting. While Opania stands for the old world of small people, who inhabited a grey zone between legality and criminality, conformity and dissidence, Lucjan represents a polarised world, in which one either wins or loses everything. As a man who works alone and is accountable only to himself, rather than to any organisation, he also represents the ideal of an 'entrepreneurial individual', promoted in the official rhetoric after the collapse of communism in Poland. His individualistic attitude is contrasted with that of the other lawyers working in Wałbrzych, who act as a corporation, representing a united front and curbing any individualistic excesses on the part of any of them. Falk compares their *modus operandi* with that of the late socialism of the 1970s, when those seeking power formed 'cliques' and, consequently, corruption and nepotism reigned in Poland. Thus, in Falk's conceptualisation, what was worst in Polish history returns because postcommunist elites are partly made up of the old *nomenklatura*.^[15] What matters, however, is that both the individualistic entrepreneurs and corporatist *post-nomenklatura* advance at the expense of the poor.

Moved by the plight of the child of his ex-girlfriend whom he deprives of an accordion, Lucjan tries to undo his actions by helping financially those to whom he has caused misery. For this purpose he

[14] V. Bunce, *Postsocialisms*, in: S. Antohi and V. Tismaneanu (eds.), *Between Past and Future: The Revolutions of 1989 and Their Aftermath*, Budapest 2000, p. 124; Kiedeckel, op. cit.

[15] For more on this hypothesis, see J. Wasilewski, *The Forming of the New Elite: How Much Nomenklatura Is Left?*, "Polish Sociological Review" 1995, no. 2, pp. 113–23.

uses money with which one of his rich customers, a dishonest businessman, attempted to bribe him, dividing it between his victims. Yet, nobody wants Lucjan's money; poor people avoid him as much in his new Robin Hood role as they avoided him in his guise as a 'punishing angel'. This refusal can be seen as proof of the honesty and dignity of working class Poles, perhaps in part motivated by Christian values, in particular, an unwillingness to enrich oneself by means of 'dirty money'. Yet, the working class Poles, as shown by Falk, cannot move beyond this negative act and help themselves. They are shown as completely passive and mute recipients of the decisions of those standing above them: the capitalists, politicians and judiciary, who form one 'postcommunist complex'. In their helplessness and exclusion from polity they epitomise the idea of Agamben's 'bare life'.

Lucjan's attempt at a charitable redistribution of his earnings leads him to jail. He is freed thanks to the efforts of local lawyers, who help him in the expectation that from now on he will conform to their ways – become 'corporatist'. Yet, the last episode, in which Lucjan angrily disrupts Robert's funeral, suggests that he rejects the model they offer. It is impossible to predict which path Lucjan will ultimately choose, as the film finishes there – in a gesture of refusal. By extension, Falk's film offers no positive vision for postcommunist Poland. Instead, it rejects as unworkable and/or immoral three different political-economic systems: the individualistic, 'modern' capitalism, represented by Bohme at the beginning of the film, the 'new socialism', encapsulated by the contrived and reformed bailiff and the new, corporatist capitalism, represented by the members of the Wałbrzych establishment which Falk regards as a continuation of the old 'real socialism'. Ultimately, the film offers no solution to the malaise caused by neoliberalism. In Falk's film, everybody is guilty and, therefore, nobody is really guilty; thus, the status quo is barely challenged.

Ode to Joy is based on the same premise as *Bailiff*, namely that there is little chance for the Polish working class to survive in postcommunist Poland. However, it points to emigration as a way to alleviate this harsh condition, facilitated by Poland joining the European Union in 2004. *Silesia* refers to this phenomenon, asking what prompts young people to emigrate. The film is set in Bytom, where in communist times, not unlike in Wałbrzych, as previously discussed, the working classes enjoyed an above-average standard of living. Bytom even acted as a magnet for young men from other provinces who sought employment there in the coalmines, and later proved a stronghold for the Solidarity movement because workers' organisations were most powerful in large industrial workplaces. Due to its previous prosperity and heroic past, the economic crisis it suffered after 1989 appears especially acute.

In the first scene of the film the main character, Aga, hears on the radio that there are strikes in several Silesian coalmines. This

Silesia: Working class people as agents of their own downfall

depressing information reaches her in London, during a bus journey to her hometown. The radio also mentions the Polish victims of the London underground bombing of 7 July 2005. We can thus deduce that for Aga there is no good place to live. In England, she is condemned to a lack of personal security, and in Poland to the harsh reality of factories closing down and the political conflict to which such closures lead. In subsequent parts, the film underscores this message by visually connecting London with Bytom, showing in both cities vast areas covered by apartment blocks, which come across as soulless machines for living. By pointing to the propinquity of London and Bytom, Kazejak-Dawid also connects the end of communism with the current state of the First World. As Charity Scribner notes, “The [communist] system’s collapse prompted comparisons to the exhausted welfare states of the West, particularly in Britain and France”.[16] This relationship provides a framework for her story, concerning the difficulties of the working class and young people to find a place for themselves. However, in the way the director appropriates guilt she shows that she is not hostile to the neoliberal project, which many critics hold responsible for the deindustrialisation of entire regions, both in the East and in the West.

Following a year of hard work in London, and the realisation that in England she would always be condemned to menial work, Aga is determined to find a place in her hometown. She wants to reestablish herself in the apartment of her parents, but this proves difficult, as her belongings were packed away when Aga’s father, a miner, decided to renovate their apartment. Yet, he failed to do so, being preoccupied with organising a Solidarity strike in his mine, threatened with closure. At the same time, Aga’s mother has lost her job in a hairdressing salon and now only works occasionally from home, providing hair care to her neighbours. Her husband’s political involvement and her own loss of social status have led the mother to a mental breakdown. Concerned for her mother, Aga decides to invest her savings in a hairdresser’s salon with up-to-date tanning facilities, where she can also work. She thus decides to become a small-scale capitalist, and the film suggests that her ‘Calvinist’ trajectory’ from hard-working manual labourer to capitalist would have been successful if not for the workers themselves, who prevent the more resourceful from improving their lot. This is demonstrated in a scene depicting a Solidarity demonstration against the mine’s closure, which changes into hooligan attacks on local businesses, including the hairdressing salon which they were about to open. Aga and her mother thus become reduced to bare life, conveyed not only by their lack of material possessions, but their loss of language, the inability to talk about their loss other than by using a couple of words.

[16] C. Scribner, *Requiem for Communism*, Cambridge 2005, p. 64.

Aga's father, who is one of the leaders of the strike, feels little remorse for causing such mayhem. When confronted by Aga, he tells her that organising the demonstration was the right thing to do because it led to reversing the decision to close the mine and showed that Solidarity still mattered. For him, the destruction of small businesses was merely a hiccup in a successful action. Yet, Kazejak-Dawid makes us identify with the perspective of Aga, who, of course, disagrees – for her, the Solidarity victory equates with the loss of her livelihood and the necessity to return to London. Solidarity is thus portrayed in *Silesia* as a force of conservatism. Its reactionary character is underscored by the fact that the strikers are obsessively attached to symbols. Aga's father is very offended when she sits on the Solidarity banner, which provides a poignant contrast to his indifference to the news about the vandalism of the hairdressing salon.

Kazejak-Dawid's criticism of Solidarity is made largely from a gender perspective. She does not miss the opportunity to show that the custodians of working-class traditions are all male and middle-aged, for whom the ambitions and plans of their wives and daughters are of little importance. The people who destroy Aga's business are also male, although younger. Such a situation encourages one to look back to the times of the 'first Solidarity', led by Lech Wałęsa. During this period, which finished with the victory of the Solidarity camp in the 1989 and 1990 elections, there appeared voices articulating the need to cater for the specific interests of female workers and special categories of employees. Yet, these voices were suppressed in order, as it was presented at the time, to prevent the fragmentation of the workers' movement. The assumption was that after the victory of Solidarity, these 'minor voices' would be heard and their needs addressed. This hope, however, was never fulfilled: subsequent governments, many of them dominated by Solidarity activists, proved anti-female and prejudiced against certain categories of workers.^[17] Kazejak-Dawid's film thus suggests that accepting unity in the 1980s led to disunity in the 2000s, and further discourages such unity along the lines of gender politics. This does not mean that identity politics has to oppose (pro-worker) class politics; but the challenge is to make them work for each other; an idea conveyed by Harvey,^[18] as well as by authors such as Hardt and Negri (2006).^[19] For that, however, both similarity and difference between different types of interests should be acknowledged and respected, which poignantly does not happen in either Polish political reality or in Kazejak-Dawid's film.

[17] See E. Hauser et al., *Feminism in the Interstices of Politics and Culture: Poland in Transition*, in: N. Funk and M. Mueller (eds.), *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*, London 1993, pp. 257–273; E. Mazierska, *Agnieszka and Other Solidarity Heroines of Polish Cinema*, "Kinema" 2002, no. 17, pp. 17–36.

[18] Harvey 2010, op. cit., pp. 227–260.

[19] M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, London 2006.

Edi: Everybody's life is equal

The eponymous character in Piotr Trzaskalski's film is a homeless scrap collector living in Łódź, a city which before the fall of communism was the main centre of the Polish textile industry (known as the Polish Manchester), as well as a symbol of the Polish capitalist past. After 1989, Łódź followed the same path as British industrial centres under Thatcher – deindustrialisation, leading to high unemployment and poverty. Edi's situation is harsh, therefore the film can be regarded as an indictment of the capitalism which caused it. Yet, capitalism is presented in a more ambiguous way. Rather than showing clearly Harvey's accumulation by dispossession, Trzaskalski suggests that capitalist wealth trickles down and is beneficial for Edi, as the 'crumbs from rich people's table' allow him to survive. Edi and his companion Jureczek virtually live on what consumer society discards. The more affluent people buy and throw away, the more the dispossessed salvage. As Edi tells Jureczek, "There is no point looking for scrap on the estates where poor people live. We should go to the places where the affluent classes dwell."

Edi survives spiritually thanks to a large collection of books, most likely also discarded by the *nouveau riche*. His knowledge and good character, however, lead to his further deprivation, when a local gangster asks him to tutor his sister for a final college exam. In due course, the young woman accuses her teacher of raping and impregnating her. Her brother and fellow gangsters punish Edi by castrating him and forcing him to look after the young woman's baby son. Soon the gangsters reach him again, upon learning that the baby's mother lied, and take away the child, leaving Edi with neither the child nor the physical ability to conceive one. The gradual dispossession of Edi of everything he has and the ruthless, criminal behaviour of his masters can be viewed as a metaphor for the 'mafia capitalism' ruling the postcommunist world, which reduces those at the receiving end to 'bare life'. Yet, it is this particular type of capitalism, which can be viewed as a fringe or a stage towards a 'civilised capitalism', which is condemned in *Edi*, not the neoliberal order at large.

Edi does not rebel against his condition of being reduced to a mutilated body, but like a true saint accepts his lot, telling Jureczek that he still has his life and he can do anything he wants with it. On several occasions, Edi also preaches to his homeless friend that in a fundamental sense all lives are equal because every person is unique: each has his/her dignity. There is no point being envious of the success of others or trying to change the world. Hence, as far as Edi is concerned, the capitalists should be allowed to go on amassing their wealth by dispossessing the poor because in a fundamental sense such behaviour does not affect either those at the top or the bottom of the pile: they will always remain who they are. Edi's pronouncements about the fundamental uniqueness of every human life and its dignity brings to mind the concept of the 'politics of recognition', as discussed by the

philosopher Charles Taylor.^[20] Yet, while Taylor points out that these ideas led to the development of the concept of 'human rights' (such as the right to live in peace and free education), which have to be protected by the state so that everybody's dignity is ensured, Trzaskalski's *Edi* suggests a different line of reasoning – there is no need to protect human rights by, most importantly, curbing the power of capital or even 'mafia capitalists' because human dignity cannot be destroyed by either external or internal circumstances. Moreover, *Edi* himself, although he is not interested in taking part in the 'capitalist game', ultimately accepts its rules and its values. A testimony to this is his decision to sell his collection of books and use the money to buy a large shiny car toy for a poor boy. In this way, he not only confirms that consumerist paradise is better than any spiritual heaven, but also shows his willingness to inculcate this view in the new generation of Poles and thus help to perpetuate the 'neoliberal circle'.

I have argued that the ideological goal of the three films discussed in this article is showing humanistic concern for those who lost out in the race for prosperity after Poland took a neoliberal turn, while accepting or at least not objecting to the overall neoliberal framework in which they operate. In this way, they repeat the gesture of the Cinema of Moral Concern, which was critical about the political and social life of late real socialism, but fell short of advocating the overthrow of the system, and hence could be seen as normalising the status quo by offering its 'constructive criticism.'^[21] Possible reasons for this stance include: an embracing of Christian values, which include respect for private property and the requirement to endure one's suffering as a means of ensuring a reward in heaven, most clearly conveyed in *Edi*; hostility to Solidarity as a hotbed of patriarchy, strongly conveyed in *Silesia*; an anti-working class bias, characteristic to many Polish film waves and especially the Cinema of Moral Concern. One can also link the ideology of these films to the relatively privileged position of Polish filmmakers, ensured by state subsidies for film production (proportionally higher than in other Eastern European countries), which they have not wanted to jeopardise by 'biting the hand which feeds them', and thus, by being too critical of the world in which they operate.

Conclusions

[20] See C. Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition*, in: A. Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton 1994, pp. 25–73.

[21] That said, some films belonging to the Cinema of Moral Concern are more radical than others. In particular, Andrzej Wajda's *Człowiek z marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, 1976) can be read as a 'revolutionary film'.