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The Meanders of Populism and Antipopulism in Polish Contemporary Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This article explores populist cinema in Poland after the Second World War, in the context of changes in Polish politics. Of particular interest is the period after 2015, when the term 'populism' entered into wide use in Poland and when we observe the production of a large number of films which can be described as 'antipopulist', mainly by female directors. The article focuses on two such films, directed by Agnieszka Holland: *Spoor/Pokot* (2017) and *Zielona granica/Green Border* (2023), trying to dissect their ideology. It argues that Holland in these films uses strategies associated with socialist realism, to discredit her ideological opponents, most importantly conservative Catholic provincials.

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Few terms in recent decades have made such a career in the media and political discourse as 'populism'. It is difficult to open a (material or virtual) newspaper without finding reports of populist parties or governments making gains in national or regional politics, often in Eastern Europe. Typically, this term does not appear in a historical context. We are thus meant to believe that populism (typically understood as a right-wing politics and met with derision) is a new phenomenon. In reality, however, populism has a long lineage, lasting at least a hundred years.

Like every successful political position, populism attracts the interest of cinema, both filmmakers who strongly identify with it and those who are virulently opposed to it. This article aims to explore populist cinema in Poland after the Second World War, in the context of changes in Polish politics. Of particular interest is the period after 2015, when the term 'populism' entered into wide use in Poland and when we observe the production of a large number of films which can be described as 'antipopulist', mainly by female directors. I focus on two such films, directed by Agnieszka Holland: *Spoor/Pokot* (2017) and *Zielona granica/Green Border* (2023), trying to dissect their ideology. However, before I move to films, let's explain the concept and the presence of populism in global cinema.

What is Populism and How It is Reflected in Film

Populism typically involves the activity of political agents (movements, parties, leaders, etc.) claiming to express popular interests and to represent associated identities and demands

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(the true will of the 'people') against an establishment, an elite, that undermines them and forestalls their satisfaction (Stavrakakis et al. 2018, 4). Populism thus contrasts 'the people' with the 'elite', presenting the former as a morally good force and the latter as selfish and corrupt (Mudde 2007, 23).

The definition of the 'people' and to some extent 'the elite' differentiates right-wing from left-wing populism. For right-wing populists 'the people' are made up of the native population, those with roots in the country in which they live. For left-wing populists 'the people' are made of workers, principally those who don't own the means of production. Hence, populism of the first type is linked to nationalism, while the second type to socialism. The elite can be constituted by the political authorities, the capitalist class or a combination of the two. Because of its focus on nationalism, the most distinct feature of modern right-wing populism is its hostility to mass immigration, in the case of Europe, from non-European countries, as populists believe that immigrants undermine the cohesion and prosperity of the host nation.

One criticism of populism is that it treats the 'people' as a homogenous mass, which results in a neglecting of the different - and sometimes contrasting - interests of sections comprising this category. In this sense, populism can be contrasted with the politics of identity, which emphasises the differences between people on the grounds of, for example, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Populists, on their part, claim that only through emphasising unity they have a chance to conquer the enemy. From this perspective, a model populist was Karl Marx, who underplayed racial differences, the history of slavery and colonialism, to point to the need of workers uniting against capitalism, as pronounced, most famously, in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 2008 [1848]).

In the bulk of literature on populism - both journalistic and academic - populism, especially of the nationalist kind, is assessed negatively as a dangerous political position, reflecting the malfunction of contemporary democracy (Mudde 2007; Mudde 2012; Müller 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019). It is presented as a conservative reaction to some inexorable cultural changes in modern societies, such as the growth of individualism, gender equality and the rise of sexual minorities, high levels of immigration, threatening society's cohesion, as well as economic hardship caused by financial crises and growing economic inequality. Researchers perceive and encourage the amelioration of these phenomena by ignoring what can be described as 'cultural grievances' and focusing on economic grievances, for example by building more affordable housing or improving health system; arguing that if the latter will be alleviated, the former would disappear naturally. Populism is also criticised for pandering and encouraging negative emotions, such as anger and disappointment (Mudde 2007; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Some authors point to the need for studying populism together with antipopulism, focusing on their mutual constitution and reproduction. This is because populist and anti-populist discourses never operate in a vacuum and need to be situated within the context of political antagonism, within the broader hegemonic struggle, which is energized by crisis situations (Stavrakakis et al. 2018, 4). It is argued that populism is born at a time of political failure, which populists present as a crisis, for which they blame the establishment. By contrast, antipopulists try to minimise the problem and blame populists for creating the crisis (ibid.). A good illustration is the situation connected with borders and refugees in Europe, where right wing populist parties, such as the Reform party in the UK, present it as a crisis, while anti-populists see the problem as being the exaggerated response

to the problem, such as 'border patrols' or vigils organised near hotels, where refugees are housed.

Populism in Film

Cinema can depict populism positively or negatively. The first happens when there is a wide consensus that there is no democracy in a given country or that the democratic system is malfunctioning. The second situation happens more often when the society is polarised and when the cinematic establishment is itself part of the elite, whose interests it tries to defend. Then it aims to ridicule and stigmatise populism and populists.

Many older films made in Hollywood, arthouse European cinema and state socialist Europe tended to promote populism, typically through criticising the authorities and advocating government by the 'common people'. Critics writing about these films are generally positive and the films occupy high positions in the cinematic canons of their countries. We can classify films such as *Bronenosets Potyomkin/Battleship Potemkin* (1925), directed by Sergei Eisenstein, Frank Capra's films, especially *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and Italian neorealist films, such as *Roma città aperta/Rome, Open City* (1945) directed by Roberto Rossellini, as populist. The first of these films, set during the Revolution of 1905, presents the rebellion on the titular ship which spread across a larger and larger sections of the Russian population, because the authorities did not represent ordinary, working people; instead wanting to keep this group oppressed. The implication is that, ultimately, the ordinary people will prevail and they will be governed by those emerging from their ranks; as evidenced by the 1917 October Revolution, for the people and by the people, as it is tacitly acknowledged by Eisenstein. The eponymous leading character of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is Jefferson Smith, whose name symbolises the noble tradition of freedom - by referencing President Thomas Jefferson - and also the sovereignty of common people, given that Smith is one of the most common surnames in the English speaking world. The unworldly Smith engages in a filibuster to postpone an Appropriations Bill, which would result in enriching some dishonest politicians and their henchmen. Smith eventually triumphs, proving that common people (whom Smith's character is totemic of) would prevail. *Rome, Open City*, set during the final stages of the German occupation of Rome during Second World War, concerns building an anti-fascist coalition in Italy, in which the Communists join forces with the Catholic Church, to defeat the Nazism and secure a better future for its people.

These three films, although they were made in different countries, under different political regimes and by directors belonging to different schools and waves, share some common characteristics. In particular, they include a high degree of pathos, eliciting deepest sympathy for the suffering of ordinary people, exploited or persecuted by ruthless and self-serving rulers. They also typically focus on the suffering and sacrifice of such people, like the priest in *Rome, Open City*, to ensure a political change. Their populism can be described as 'populism from the left'.

In more recent times film populism on the left is associated with the documentary cinema of Michael Moore, which is characterised by focusing on societal and political disempowerment of ordinary people and its direct cinematic style (Jensen 2022). Paradoxically, while political historians and commentators focus on right-wing populism, such populism is practically absent in Hollywood cinema. It is impossible to find films praising the rule of

Bush or Trump. This can be explained by the fact that cinematic establishment there overwhelmingly identifies itself as left-wing.

Polish Cinema of State Socialism Period through the Lens of Populism

As far as I am aware, the history of postwar Eastern European and, specifically, Polish cinema, was never investigated through the lens of populism, even though the popular struggle of the Polish nation and the common people against elites - portrayed as ethnically and culturally alien to Poles - constitutes an important motif of its cinema, as well as literature. In particular, Polish Romantic literature, which holds a privileged place in the Polish consciousness, is largely dedicated to the Polish uprisings against the partitioners. The importance of the national struggle is also conveyed through the titles of books about Polish cinema, such as *Polish National Cinema* (Haltof 2002) and *The Red and the White: The Cinema of People's Poland* (Coates 2005). These books and many other tend to focus on specific film movements or waves, and I will follow in their footsteps, considering the extent and nature of populist tropes in them.

The first distinct period is socialist realism. During this period populism flourished in historical films or films set elsewhere than Poland, because, in the official ideology, the authorities and the people were in tune with each other and united. Irrespective of the lived reality for ordinary people, this was how socialist realist narratives were manifest in film; the paths of a naïve person, manipulated by the foreign forces, being corrected by 'good Communists', highlighting that the Communists were on their side. Historical films, on the other hand, pointed out that in the past there was an antagonism between the ordinary people who was exploited by their masters. Such films could take place in the medieval or even mythical past, and concern national as well as class struggles, but each struggle tends to be represented as a class struggle, and its leaders as people's leaders, trying to defend them against proto-capitalist forces. Such situations are conspicuous in biopics, be it one about General Świerczewski as in *Żołnierz zwycięstwa/The Soldier of Victory* (1953), directed by Wanda Jakubowska or Chopin in *Młodość Chopina/Youth of Chopin* (1952) by Aleksander Ford, who leads Poles to the revolution.

We also find populist accents in socialist realist films with contemporary themes, such as *Piątka z ulicy Barskiej/Five from the Barska Street* (1953), directed by Aleksander Ford, *Niedaleko Warszawy/Not Far from Warsaw* (1954), directed by Maria Kaniewska and *Uczta Baltazara* (*Balthzarar's Feast*, 1954) by Jerzy Zarzycki, but here the object of criticism were the interwar elites, pitted against ordinary people. Thus, from the perspective of representation of populism, these films can be also described as historical. The absence of contemporary populist films in this period suggests that, for the populist cinema to thrive, its makers need to enjoy freedom to criticise the authorities, which means that the authorities are not completely hostile to and alienated from the people. By the same token, when the antagonism between the people and the elites is extreme, paradoxically, it becomes a taboo, because the authorities do not want to admit that they are on a collision course with the people.

The next distinct wave in Polish cinema was the Polish School, which lasted from the mid-1950s till the mid-1960s. Its focus was on Polish martyrdom during the Second World War. Although films belonging to this wave were historical in the sense that, by the time

the films were made, the war was over, some films belonging to this wave, most importantly *Popiół i diament*/*Ashes and Diamonds* (1957) by Andrzej Wajda, suggested that postwar Poland might not be united due to a significant part of the population (those who fought in the Home Army, aligned with the Polish government in London) being excluded from polity. This idea is conveyed by death of the main character, Maciek, the ex-member of the Home Army who dies on a rubbish heap, when escaping soldiers. A populist fraction can be identified within the Polish School, in the work of directors such as Kazimierz Kutz, in *Krzyż Walecznych*/*The Cross of Valour* (1958) and Stanisław Różewicz, in *Wolne miasto*/*Free City* (1958) and *Świadectwo urodzenia*/*Birth Certificate* (1961), among others. It is worth mentioning that later Kutz created the populist Silesian cinema, in which he contrasted the noble simple Silesian people against their rulers. A clear affirmation of the plebeian identity can also be found in the early cinema of Ewa and Czesław Petelski, such as *Baza ludzi umarłych*/*The Depot of the Dead* (1958) and *Kamienne niebo*/*Stone Heaven* (1959).

The decade following the end of the Polish School (from the early to mid-1960s till the early to mid-1970s) lacked any distinct movements. Polish cinema of this period, with some exceptions, avoided political themes, focusing on private lives, often represented through the lens of genre, mostly comedies and criminal stories. This reflected the relative stability of the 1960s, known as the time of 'small stabilisation'. The tacit assumption was that the society is not as united as the authorities wanted people to believe, but ultimately it functioned reasonably well.

The second half of the 1970s brought a series of films known as Cinema of Moral Concern or Cinema of Moral Anxiety, whose main representatives were Krzysztof Kieslowski, Krzysztof Zanussi, Agnieszka Holland and Andrzej Wajda. As the name of the movement suggests, it conveys a critical – or at least cynical - attitude towards the state amongst Polish society. The films highlight incompetence and corruption in the communist government and – most importantly – its detachment from ordinary people, whose voices are silenced (Dabert 2003). They also typically focus on the intelligentsia, with this strata of society providing the majority of lead characters, whilst tending to present working-class people - especially those coming from the provinces - as selfish or immature. The plot conflicts in these films are routinely along two axis: between the 'people' and the authorities, and between the provincials or manual workers against the metropolitan or educated people. Any social and political advancement of the ambitious provincials in these films is treated with suspicion. Moral Concern films tend to be preoccupied with identifying the causes of the social anomie; they are unable or unwilling to offer any solution. This renders them very pessimistic, especially their endings, where the main character finds themselves defeated or dead.

Against this background, Andrzej Wajda's *Człowiek z marmuru*/*Man of Marble* (1976), stands out for two reasons: its representation of the Polish society is simpler and political diagnosis more optimistic. Rather than pitting the educated against the working class, or the dwellers of large cities against provincials, it depicts an educated and ambitious provincial, the budding documentary filmmaker Agnieszka. Agnieszka begins her cinematic journey by trying to understand Polish postwar history through researching the history of a shock worker, Mateusz Birkut, who, after a period of ascension, became a 'fallen star', and was erased from monuments because he stood up to the communist authorities. In this contemporary-set film, the authorities operate like capitalists, because they are in charge of the means of production - in this case film equipment - which they make available to

film students in exchange for political conformity. Agnieszka, however, does not want to conform. Therefore, at the end of the film, she is denied access to such equipment and loses any realistic chance of finishing her project about Birkut. Despite this, Wajda's film is optimistic. Agnieszka, in the end, is not defeated, but defiant. Moreover, the film depicts the building of a coalition of people united across classes, generations and genders, against the communist authorities. This coalition is represented by Agnieszka, a filmmaker of a working-class background and Birkut, initially a naive and well-meaning worker, who became a fighter against the state socialist system, as would be also the case of many Polish workers in the 1970s and 1980s.

Człowiek z żelaza/Man of Iron (1981) continues the theme of building the union of Poles coming from different walks of life, willing to liberate their country from the oppressive communist regime, whose ascent and flourishing was concurrent with the production of this film. The vehicle of such unification is the Solidarity trade union, supported by the Catholic church. Wajda in this film refers to different moments of rebellions in Polish postwar history, such as October 1956 and December 1970, when Polish workers protested against increases in the prices of basic groceries, especially meat, and 1968, which was the year of the students' strikes, arguing that they failed due to the lack of unity, in contrast to the strikes of 1980. In this sense, it is a unique film in the history of Polish cinema, as it locates populist struggle in the current times, assesses it positively and presents it as successful (Pietrzak 2025, 117-19).

The victory of Solidarity was temporarily halted by the introduction of martial law in 1981, but eventually was completed by 1989, following the Roundtable negotiations and democratic elections, which – in nutshell – offered a binary choice between the old political order and the new one.

Early Postcommunist Politics and Cinema

The first decade or so after the fall of the Iron Curtain was dominated by technocratic-liberal solutions, epitomised by the programme and personality of the Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz with his disdain for the 'naive belief … that things can be explained to people' (Stanley and Stanley 2020, 380). Hence, Balcerowicz, whose roots were, ironically, in the (communist) Polish United Workers' Party, became the first postwar Polish antipopulist. His solutions proved painful to a large part of the population, particularly due to mass closing of supposedly unprofitable factories, leading to mass unemployment, especially in the East of Poland and places where life of the community was organised around a single factory.

The early period of Polish postcommunist politics was described as 'War at the top' (Wojna na górze), referring to the conflict between the Solidarity leader Lcch Wałęsa and the prime minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and their respective camps. The name was meaningful, as it suggested that the conflict was between political elites, who held power, while the common people stayed united, stoically accepting the high cost of economic transformation. Polish society grew increasingly divided - and along many lines - with tensions emerging over conflicting attitudes to economic programmes, foreign policy (especially towards Russia), religion, sexual minorities, the communist past, the Catholic Church, and Polish traditions. The opposition to what Bill Stanley and Ben Stanley describe as 'liberal consensus' (Stanley and Stanley 2020, 379), introduced by Balcerowicz's regime, was initially

fragmented, but gained in force and coherence after the 2000s, both on the right and the left. The opposition from the left eventually was incorporated into the technocratic liberal centre, while the right solidified, leading to the creation of the Law and Justice Party in 2001.

Although this political fracturing was inevitable, in the 1990s it was a cause of disappointment and regret of artists who strongly supported the Solidarity cause, such as Andrzej Wajda. The lack of political unity, combined with the economic crisis affecting film industry (even though Wajda and other artists of his generation retained a privileged position as far as funding was concerned) resulted in many of the older directors turning to the distant history. Films such as *Pan Tadeusz* (1999), directed by Andrzej Wajda and *Ogniem i mieczem*/*With Fire and Sword* (1999), directed by Jerzy Hoffman, take us to an imaginary past when Poles, often against their quarrelsome nature, unite to fight their enemies, most importantly Russians (Mazierska 2016).

In contemporary cinema the situation was different, especially when it became clear that the political changes left a large section of the population worse-off than before 1989 or at least not as good as many supporters of Solidarity had expected. Hence, from the 1990s we observe in Polish cinema frequent portrayals of people who are left behind, such as the documentary film *Mgła*/*Fog* (1993), directed by Irena Kamieńska, *Edi* (2002), directed by Piotr Trzaskalski and *Z odzysku*/*From Recycling* (2006), directed by Sławomir Fabicki. These films, however, barely addressed wider ideological divisions in Poland, limiting themselves to humanistic concern for the 'left behind'. Increasingly, however, we find films which, although still mourning the difficult situation of the working class, especially in the deindustrialised regions whose inhabitants are unemployed or take any job available, point to the antagonistic interests of the working-class men and women. From this perspective, *Dzień kobiet*/*Women's Day* (2012), directed by Maria Sadowska and 'Śląsk' (Silesia), directed by Anna Kazejak-Dawid, an episode in the anthology films *Oda do radości*/*Ode to Joy* (2006) deserve attention. The first shows a male manager of a supermarket sexually and psychologically abusing his female employees. The second portrays a young woman who returned from England with some savings and invests them in her mother hairdressing salon. However, the salon is vandalised, following Solidarity demonstration against the mine closure and her own father, who is a Solidarity activist, is shown as indifferent to his daughter's plight. It can be suggested that Kazejak-Dawid's film, in fact, embraces a neoliberal order, which perceives trade unions as a hindrance to the efficient accumulation of capital (Mazierska 2017, 302-4).

The Victory of PiS and the Populist and Antipolpulist Discourse after 2015

As James Mark and Stanley and Stanley observe, in terms of intellectual debates, the liberal consensus was far from the only game in town at the outset of transition; other conceptions of democracy included a reformed socialism and direct democracy (Iacob et al. 2019, 110; Stanley and Stanley 2020) as well as the ideas of a current of pro-capitalist reformers who, while not rejecting democracy, evinced scepticism about its immediate benefits (Dzielski 1995, 286–289). Nevertheless, in terms of actual politics, the technocratic management prevailed, coupled with disdain of ideology, especially 'identity issues', such as the role of the Catholic church, gender, sexuality and immigration policy. In this respect, the period of the liberal consensus can be compared to the long rule of New Labour in the UK.

Early Polish liberal parties, such as the Liberal-Democratic Congress (Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny, KLD) and the Freedom Union (Unia Wolności, UW) culminated in setting up Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO) in 2001, which would become one of Poland's two major parties. Initially, PO's policy platform bore the imprint of the party's liberal origins, but after coming to power in 2007 it increasingly shifted toward the position of a technocratic and conflict-avoiding managerialism.

From the beginning of transition, conservative groups and social movements were annoyed by liberalism's assumption of its natural superiority. While these voices were disparate, isolated and largely ineffectual during the 1990s, over the next decade they became increasingly convincing, particularly after the economic crisis of 2008. Although this crisis did not greatly affect Poland in economic terms, the worldwide damage it inflicted on liberals' credibility helped forge an ideological opportunity structure for opponents of liberalism, especially from the right. This programme eventually coalesced into the programme of the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i sprawiedliwość, PiS), set up in 2001 and led by the Kaczyński brothers, Jarosław and Lech. PiS won the parliamentary elections in 2015, and its candidate, Andrzej Duda, became its President the same year. PiS ruled till 2023, when, although it came top in parliamentary elections, it did not receive enough votes to rule on its own and was unable to build a coalition with other parties, paving the way to a new ruling bloc, led by its chief adversary, Civic Platform.

The programme of PiS included left-wing economic policies, such as a generous child support, raising of the minimum wage, increases to retirement and disability pensions, free medicines for seniors, and the elimination of income tax for workers under 25 years of age. Addressing economic and regional inequalities was at the centre of the government's agenda and it turned out to be very successful on this front. While in western countries the use of food banks has been growing, in many Polish provincial towns they were closed due to a lack of people needing to use them. These measures were introduced, however, not in the name of socialism, but nationalism and by way of compensating for the injustices which were visited upon on ordinary Poles after 1989, notably where the benefits of transition, especially privatisation, were enjoyed by the few, and especially the members of the old nomenklatura. PiS also, proving its traditionalism and loyalty to the Church, tightened laws surrounding abortion law, making it one of the most restrictive laws in Europe. Inevitably, this latter policy angered Polish feminists and many ordinary women, resulting in their widespread protests, such as Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (Polish Women's Strike), in 2016 and 2020.

The other part of PiS' programme included taking back Polish sovereignty from the control of the European Union, which infuriated the 'progressive left', who perceived the EU as a civilising force upon Eastern Europe. At the same time, the PiS government embarked on a process of dominating other centres of political power, such as the media - especially the state television - and judiciary. This was, again, criticised very strongly by their opponents. The ostensive reason for hostility from their opponents was the sense that PiS were embarking on power grab and undermining democracy in Poland, to the point of claiming that Poland was being rendered an undemocratic and authoritarian state. The possible, although unspoken, reason of any critique, however, was that these institutions were dominated by the opponents of PiS; thereby resurrecting the historical tensions evident in Poland between an urban/metropolitan intelligentsia - who traditionally dominate such spheres - and the supposedly uneducated provincials.

After 2015 we thus have observed a sharp conflict between populists and antipopulists, in which the former accused their adversaries of putting the rights of the minorities over that of the majority, as well as foreign over domestic interests, while the former criticised populists for not protecting minorities, silencing the voices of women, ignoring international laws and regulations and creating a perception of crisis which calls for state intervention. The privileged area of these debates was the media and the cultural sphere.

The Discourse of Populism and Antipopulism in Polish Cinema after 2015

Already in the Polish cinema of the first half of the 1990s, particularly in films about Solidarity, such as *Kraj świata/The End of the World* (1993), directed by Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz, *Człowiek z…/Man of….* (1993), directed by Konrad Szołajski *and Gracze/Players* (1995), directed by Ryszard Bugajski, we can observe the first signs of anti-populist tendencies in Polish post-communist cinema, especially in the hostility to the Catholic Church (Kornacki and Bilecki 2024, 115-16). However, I will argue that anti-populist discourse was not fully articulated in them. By contrast, Polish cinema after 2015 became an important battleground between different visions of Poland: populist and antipopulist. The first vision is conveyed largely through historical films, especially films returning to Polish war and postwar history, taking issue with the fate of the 'cursed soldiers'. These were soldiers who belonged to the Home Army and were unwilling to accept the Soviet hegemony after the Second World War, paying for their political position with their lives or a long incarceration. As examples can serve *Historia Roja/The History of Roj* (2016), directed by Jerzy Zalewski, *Wyklęty/Cursed* (2017), directed by Konrad Łęcki and *Raport Pileckiego/Pilecki's Report* (2023), directed by Krzysztof Łukaszewicz.

These films were made by less known and established directors. There are, practically, no populist films set in the present. This might be explained by two factors. One is the possible difficulty to defend populism, given the changes experienced by the Polish population, such as decline in religiosity and increase in pro-choice position regarding abortion. Another factor might reflect awareness of filmmakers of the political cost of adopting such a position, given that the bulk of intellectual elites in Poland, as elsewhere in Europe, is antipopulist, which is reflected, most conspicuously, by distribution of awards at the leading European film festivals, especially the Berlin Festival, where Polish films fare well. Being a populist director is thus tantamount to remaining a provincial director, operating at the periphery of the international film industry.

By contrast, films which can be classified as antipopulist do very well in terms of critical reception, winning awards at festivals in Poland and internationally. Most of these films, as Krzysztof Kornacki observes, are directed by women. They include *W imię…/In the Name of…* (2013), *Body/ciało/Body* (2015) *Twarz/Mug* (2017) and *Córka boga/The Other Lamb* (2019), all directed by Małgorzata Szumowska; *Dzikie róże/Wild Roses* (2017), directed Anna Jadowska, *Spoor*, directed by Agnieszka Holland and Kasia Adamik, *Wieża. Jasny dzień/Tower. A Bright Day* (2017), directed by Jagoda Szelc, *Powrót/Back Home* (2018), directed by Magdalena Łazarkiewicz, *Maryjki/Marygoround* (2020) by Daria Woszek, as well as a documentary *Komunia/Communion* (2016) by Anna Zamecka (Kornacki 2021). What connects these films is a focus on women and hostility to Catholicism, understood as an institutional religion, model of life and a type of spirituality. Kornacki, in fact, considers these films through the prism of their negative attitude to Catholicism, but most of them

include other elements of the anitipopulist agenda, such as misandry, as well as an idea that there is a conspiracy of the powerful against the powerless, which, however, the weak do not accept, but try to oppose by building their own alliances of 'good people', coming from different walks of life, in order to fight the mighty. These films are also conspicuous in omitting the issue of class. This is, again, typical of an antipopulist position, because populist politicians often portray themselves as defenders of the working classes and ordinary people. This is also the case of the Law and Justice Party in Poland, as I already mentioned.

Agnieszka Holland's Antipopulist Cinema

Of the filmmakers who embarked on the task of attacking the populist ideology, one of the most voracious antipopulist, along with Małgorzata Szumowska, became Agnieszka Holland, who in this period produced, together with her daughter, Kasia Adamik, two films, which I will describe as emphatically antipopulist, the previously mentioned *Spoor* and *Green Border*. Holland and Adamik were also vocal in engaging in political campaigns, primarily in support of LGBT+ rights (*The Independent* 2021) and in support of refugees coming to Poland. It could be argued that these two films address these two issues; the first less directly, the second explicitly.

Spoor is based on a novel by Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (*Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych*), published in 2009. Tokarczuk, like Holland, was also engaged politically against PiS policies. The film is set in the remote mountainous region of the Kłodzko Valley, which one can assume, is a PiS stronghold. Its main character is Janina Duszejko, a retired civil engineer, who recently moved to a village, getting a part-time job as an English teacher in a local primary school. At the beginning of the story Duszejko lives on her own with her two dogs in an old house. She is seen by a local population as an eccentric outsider. Her outsider status can be gathered from her singlehood and the fact that she teaches English, by the same token she can be viewed as cosmopolitan or at least open to foreign cultures, rather than taking Polish culture for granted. This is later confirmed by her mentioning that she had designed bridges in the Middle East. Duszejko is also an amateur astrologist, who tries to understand people's character and behaviour by learning about the precise moment of their birth. This interest can be seen as her subscribing to a different version of spirituality or transcendence than that offered by the Catholic Church. Elżbieta Ostrowska describes Duszejko as a 'truly feminist heroine who can also be seen as a modernised variant of the Central European witch as re-read by the feminist criticism' (Ostrowska 2024, 208).

A worldview of Duszejko, as Robert Birkholc notes, also corresponds with posthumanist discourse, which promotes harmonious coexistence with nature and empathy toward animals (Birkholc 2022). When she 'goes out for a walk with her dogs at sunrise, is first shown from the low perspective, and then from the high point of view, against the background of a beautiful sky, which expresses her sense of connection with both the micro- and macrocosm' (ibid.). More importantly, Duszejko speaks of her dogs, who disappeared shortly after the beginning of the film, describing them as 'my daughters', 'my only family'. The priest, who listens to her admission, and is shown graves of animals decorated with wooden sculptures Duszejko made herself, asks her to stop such talking, claiming that putting animals on the same level as humans is a sin. An assertion that animals' lives do not have the same value as human lives might be regarded as common sense, but the priest is presented in a

very antipathetic way; indifferent to Duszejko's plight, and both remote and patronising in his dismissal of her grief. By extension, the film criticises the Polish Church for being aloof, hostile to women and siding with animal killers. Their conflict, as Birkholc notes, is also expressed through visual means:

> The characters are either situated at opposite ends of the frame, facing each other, in a somewhat confrontational position, or shown separately, in completely mismatched shots. Non-standard editing (for example breaking the 180-degree rule; see Figure 1 and Figure 2), creates the impression of spatiotemporal incoherence and confuses the viewer. Disorganized, fragmented space becomes a symbolic representation of the lack of a common (discursive) ground between interlocutors. (Birkholc 2022)

The culmination of the conflict between Duszejko and the Church is a scene in a church, when the children sing a song praising hunters in front of the carcass of a wild board and the priest blesses the hunters, claiming that they were the first to protect the environment.

Another institution criticised in Holland's film is the police. The policeman, who interrogates Duszejko in relation to the death of her neighbour, like the priest, comes across as indifferent towards her concern of the abused and killed animals. He confesses that he ignored Duszejko's complaints about animal abuse by local poachers, who broke the law, but fails to apologise and, like the priest, is patronising towards her. We also learn that the policeman owes money to Wnętrzak, the local businessman, who owns a fox-breeding farm. His debt, inevitably, prevents him from impartiality in enforcing the law – he has to side with animal abusers against those who try to protect them. The coalition of people who yield power over different spheres of life (economy, law, spiritual life), can be equated with the 'PiS coalition'. Men play a privileged role in it, but many provincial women acquiesce to its power, for example the headmistress of the local school, who decorates the school with the 'Hunters' Calendar' and chastises Duszejko for taking children to the wood in the evening.

Against them, there is a coalition of the oppressed and disempowered; consisting of animals and their principal ally Duszejko; as well as a local woman, who is Wnętrzak's lover; an abused wife of another businessman; a young man suffering from epilepsy, whom Duszejko's helps during an attack; a neighbour who is half-German, who excels in mushroom picking; and a Czech entomologist, researching some local insects which are threatened with extinction. This coalition, an 'intersectional alliance', consisting of women and different minorities with aligned interests, can be described as an anti-PiS and antipopulist coalition. This coalition of good people also reflects the international character of Holland's project, which enjoyed financial support from Czechia and Germany.

Holland is firmly on the side of the antipopulist alliance. This is conveyed also through the use cinematography and language. For example, when Duszejko talks with any of her adversaries, be it the priest, the policeman or any of her blood-thirsty neighbours, the camera focuses on their mouth, showing their bare teeth, which renders them as dangerous predators. When it moves to Duszejko, we see her eyes in close-up, suggesting that she is a thoughtful, caring person. Duszejko talks in a simple, but witty language, while the men speak with a vulgar tongue. She is also typically shown against the backdrop of nature, in a wood, on the hills or planting in her garden, while the villagers are more often shown indoors and we never see them working on the land. Duszejko also talks in a way which mocks the language of the Bible (Birkholc 2022).

If they are out, this is not to commune with nature, but to kill. In this way Holland opposes the romantic tradition of portraying villagers as having a deep and spiritual connection with the land, as depicted, for example, by the Polish painter Józef Chełmoński. In her film, by contrast, it is urban outsiders who understand and want to protect nature against the assaults of the locals. The superiority of Duszejko over the provincials is suggested even by her surname, from 'dusza' meaning 'soul'. Significantly, she does not want to be addressed by her Christian name, but only her surname, emphasising its importance in reflecting her character. Her chief adversary's name is Wnętrzak, from 'wnętrza' (interiors), which can be seen as a reference to his work as somebody who takes guts from animals or shuns outdoors. Apart from Duszejko, an important custodian of nature is the Czech entomologist, Boris Sznajder, who compares burning logs of wood with their larvae to the Holocaust. In fact, such claims, often made by members of animal rights movements, simultaneously undermines the suffering of the Holocaust and the seriousness of pro-animal activism. Arguing that the true custodians of Polish nature are urban people and foreigners - while people living in the rural areas are nature's chief enemies - chimes with the composition and programme of Green parties, which are an important faction of an antipopulist opposition in Poland and other European countries, with a membership and support base coming mostly from the urban educated middle classes. Such political parties define farmers not as producers of food, but as producers of greenhouse gases and polluters of the countryside, which the Green parties tries to save. In Holland's film the antipopulist coalition wins by punishing the abusers with a death sentence and burning the church. However, this happens off-screen, like a miracle, which can be regarded as a tacit admission of the difficulty of overcoming the 'populists' by the 'antipopulist' coalition.

In *Green Border* Holland continues the path of denouncing populism and offering an alternative political position. The film illustrates well the previously mentioned dynamics of populism and antipopulism and their relationship to the perceived political failure. On this occasion, the failure concerns securing Polish Eastern borders, specifically with Belarus, which has been used since the early 2020s for the crossing of a large number of asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants from the Global South. This is seen as part of a hybrid war between Belarus and Poland and the revenge for economic sanctions of the EU imposed on Belarus. For Polish populists, the situation on the border constitutes a crisis of the Polish authorities and needs extraordinary measures, such as a presence of military personnel in large numbers and building fences. For antipopulists, such as Holland, on the other hand, the crisis is artificial: immigrants, the majority of whom do not want to settle in Poland, but further west, do not constitute a danger to Polish society and should be welcomed rather than pushed back.

In Holland's film, asylum seekers, metaphorically speaking, took the place of animals in *Spoor*. The place of the hunters, on the other hand, is taken by the apparatus of the state, most importantly the border police guarding the Polish-Belarus border in a remote Podlasie region, and trying to prevent asylum seekers, who reached Belarus from the Middle East, to cross the border into Poland. The victims at the centre of the narrative are a Syrian family, consisting of parents with their three young children and the husband's elderly father. They fly to Belarus convinced that, from there, they would be able to move freely to the European Union. Their ultimate destination is Sweden, where the brother of the husband lives. However, crossing the Polish border proves much more difficult than expected, because

Poland pushes the refugees back to Belarus, while Belarus pushes them to Poland, resulting in many being lost in the woodland, suffering abuse from both sides of the political conflict.

The film, unlike in Holland's earlier production which firmly adopted Duszejko's perspective, presents the action from several perspectives: that of the immigrants' family, a border guard, and a female psychologist who moved to the region and became involved in helping asylum seekers. This might suggest that the director is more balanced in presenting the arguments of different sides of the conflict, specifically the immigrants and NGOs, facilitating their relocation to the West on one hand, and border guards, on the other. However, Jan, the border guard, like the female psychologist, ultimately sides with the immigrants, when seeing their suffering. The message behind this representation is that asylum seekers should be allowed to come to Poland and assisted in their efforts to reach the countries in the EU of their choice, rather than being stopped. In effect, Holland advocates for Poland with open borders. Such a view was at odds with the ideology and the policy of PiS, which was in power, when the film was in production. It is also in contrast to what the populist parties in other European countries has advocated for many decades and which, ultimately, was adopted by the mainstream right wing and many left wing parties, namely the tightening of borders to prevent large number of immigrants, mostly from the Middle East and Africa, coming to Europe on the grounds that they pose demographic, security, economic and cultural threats to Europe.

Holland not only opposed PiS policies through her film, but also off-screen, both for its attitude to immigration, but also for many of its other supposed mistakes and wickedness. She also suggested that it would be better if only women were allowed to vote (Walewski 2023), alluding to the fact that the electorate of PiS, as of many right-wing parties in Europe, is predominantly male, while women are more likely to vote for establishment and left-wing parties. She also used the media interest in her film to attack Polish Catholics, accusing them for not being true Christians. In addition, she evoked the Holocaust, comparing the treatment of refugees on the border to that of Jews during the Second World War and the action of the Polish government and its supporters to fascists (Ciobanu 2023). The government, for its part, denounced her film as antithetical to Polish national interests and refused to grant it a subsidy from the Polish Ministry of Culture (Kempys 2023).

Green Border received the Grand Prix at the Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia, in 2024. This award, which was widely seen as a sign of an endorsement of the political content of the film rather than its artistic merit, demonstrates that the film establishment in Poland overwhelmingly subscribes to the antipopulist discourse. This is, again, in line with the prevailing cinematic attitude to illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, which prioritise their needs and the duties of the local population to fulfil them, while ignoring or minimising the negative consequences of an unrestricted migration, such as the decrease in employment opportunities and incomes for native populations and associated pressures on housing, education, and health services, as well as an increased risk of Islamist terrorism.

When *Green Border* triumphed in Gdynia, Poland already had a new government of the centre-left coalition led by Donald Tusk from Civic Platform. Holland turned out to be critical of this government too, due to it retaining the asylum policy of its predecessor and even tightening it. Again, this is in line with the policies of many governments across the western world which, when faced with an upsurge of illegal immigration, attempt to protect their borders and avoid the problems this creates for the local populations. In the Polish

context, the murder of a Polish border guard by a refugee on the Polish-Belarus border, in June 2024, under the watch of Civic Platform government created a political impetus for the persisting of PiS' asylum policies (Kozłowski 2024). After this incident, Tusk promised to tighten the border, claiming that pushing the emigrants to the Polish side of the border by the Belarus guards is a strategy to destabilise Poland and the EU, used by Putin and his Belorussian allies (Easton 2024). The Civic Platform anti-immigrant platform disappointed Holland, who said that in a sense the current government is worse than that of PiS, as it quashed all hope for the better treatment of refugees (Pawłowski 2024).

Conclusion

My argument is that, until the last decade or so, populism was depicted positively in Poland. Most importantly, during the time of Solidarity the leading Polish director, Andrzej Wajda, stood in solidarity with ordinary people against the Polish elites, which he accused of acting against the vital interests of ordinary people. Since the victory of the Law and Justice Party, however, the antipopulist discourse has prevailed and filmmakers have aligned with the elites against the popular [populist] sentiments of ordinary people. Antipopulist views are explicitly and implicitly espoused by the leading Polish female directors, such as Małgorzata Szumowska and Agnieszka Holland. I argue that the strategy used by Holland is to create on screen a neatly divided world, in which the morally virtuous unite in the antipopulist coalition, led by the Polish metropolitan intelligentsia, while the villains form the populist alliance. Although the populists have power, they ultimately lose, although through rather unexpected and unconvincing ways. Antipopulists accuse populists of dehumanising their adversaries but, in Holland's films, we observe dehumanisation of the populist coalition, largely through emphasising their gratuitous cruelty and evoking the Holocaust tropes to represent the treatment of the antipopulist coalition in the hands of their opponents. Such a mapping of social reality reminds us of Polish films of Polish socialist realism, the movement which lost its hegemony in the mid-1950s but has lingered in the subsequent history of Polish cinema.

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