

Between the Sacred and the Profane, the Sublime and the Trivial: The Magic Realism of Jan Jakub Kolski

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Introduction - Terminology and Theoretical Perspective

Amongst the Polish filmmakers who emerged after the collapse of communism, Jan Jakub Kolski is regarded in his native country as the most original (Karbowski, 1994: 6; Stachowna, 1998: 23). Indeed, amongst a whole generation of young directors, whose main purpose seems to be to adapt the rules of the gangster or thriller genre to contemporary Polish reality, Kolski is an exception. His films are not commercial projects, either in the sense of choosing topical subjects or of uncritically following American fashions. Instead, he examines the side of Polish life which is parochial and apparently lacking in drama and political events. In spite of this his films have managed to attract a large and loyal following, of mostly young people, who immediately recognize his style, snatches of dialogue and characters from his films and look forward to each new production. Kolski also received more awards at the Gdansk/Gdynia Polish Films Festivals than any other director, including the main award for his last film, *Historia kina w Popielawach* (*The History of Cinema in Popielawy*, 1998) in 1998. Furthermore, during the 1990s he has been practically the only Polish filmmaker to gain recognition abroad. His films have represented Poland at the International Film Festival in Cannes and were shown in many other countries. His highest international achievement was the main award at the International Film Festival in Tokyo in 1995 for his *Grajacy z talerza* (*Playing from a Plate*, 1995).

The purpose of this article is to provide a general overview of Kolski's work, which I hope, will serve a more focused and detailed analysis of his work in future. I would suggest that the main feature of his cinema is blending of two opposites. Firstly, ethnographic authenticity, being deeply rooted in Polish history and the author's own biography; secondly, exuberant magic, which I will label "Magic Realism". Kolski himself encourages this description by film critics, for example, he admitted on several occasions that Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude* was one of his favourite books and expressed a desire to make a film based on it (Wojcik, 1994: 10).

The term "Magic Realism" is not new, being coined to describe the Latin American literature of the late 1960s and 1970s, represented by such authors as Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortazar, Jose Donoso and most of all, Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Ousby, 1993-95). Their books were about miracles in the real world; they dealt with such phenomena as "the fusion of the realms which we know to be separated, the abolition of the laws of statics, the loss of identity, the distortion of natural size and shape, the suspension of the category of objects, the destruction of personality, and the fragmentation of historical order" (Nigro, 1975: 220). Typical inhabitants of the world of Magic Realism were people who lived centuries and newborn babies or foetuses who had the appearances and knowledge of adult

people. The fact that Magic Realism (although present also in the work of some European and American writers, such as Gunther Grass or Vladimir Nabokov) flourished in Latin America is often explained by the fact that "the post-colonial experience involved sharp discrepancies between the cultures of technology and superstition" (Ousby, 1993-95).

In the 1990s the term "Magic Realism" was used by Fredric Jameson in reference to the Soviet science fiction cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, primarily to films made by Andrei Tarkovsky and Alexander Sokurov (Jameson, 1992). Again, their films depicted fantastic or strange events in a world which in many respects bore close affinity to the Russian reality of late communism. In all cases "Magic Realism" was applied to art which was unashamedly parochial, placed on the margin or even outside Western civilization, but which at the same time, thanks to its stylistic innovation and ample use of allegory, achieved a universal appeal.

Magic Realism is typically described as an art of "post" (post-realism, post-colonialism) and in the case of Kolski, as I will try to demonstrate, postcommunism. It conveys the feeling of a profound crisis or change - in history, in politics, in social relations, in art, in human consciousness. Another term, including "post", with which the paradigm is associated, and which will be paramount in my discussion of Kolski's work, is postmodernism, understood both as artistic style and as ideology or *Weltanschauung*. When talking about postmodern style I will refer to such features as intertextuality and self-referentiality, as well as breaking with chronological narration. The elements of postmodern *Weltanschauung* which are of particular use for my analysis of Kolski's *oeuvre*, are rejecting the privileged role of a white male by focusing on those who live on the margin: cripples and animals, and questioning the status of "history" and "truth". Magic Realism, as the critics note, is essentially eclectic. Thus, discussing Kolski as Magic Realist inadvertently induces activating some other concepts, such as comedy and Camp. I hope that they will help to better understand the work of this artist by placing his films in a wider context of contemporary art and culture in general.

Cinematic Connections

The most noticeable feature of Kolski's style is his interest in rural, peasant life. In this respect he has few antecedents in Polish cinema. If rural life was depicted at all, as in the popular comedies of Sylwester Chęcinski, such as *Sami swoi* (*All Countrymen*, 1967) which portrayed the lives of Poles repatriated from Lithuania to the regained territories in the West, or *Kogel-mogel* (1988) by Roman Zaluski, it served mainly as a background to stories so stereotyped and sentimental that they could just as well be set in the city without changing their essential character.

The only film which critics mention in the context of Kolski's work is *Zywot Mateusza* (*The Life of Mateusz*, 1968) by Witold Leszczyński, based on a novel by the Norwegian writer, Tarjea Vesaas. This film depicts a village idiot (or saint) who seeks happiness communing with nature. Characteristically, *The Life of Mateusz* was regarded as being foreign to Polish culture, rather Scandinavian than Slavic. Similarly, the first films by Kolski, *Pogrzeb kartofla* (*Funeral of a Potato*, 1990) and *Pograbek* (1992), although set in the Polish countryside, retained an aura of unfamiliarity about them; native critics needed some time to appreciate their Polishness. There is also a certain affinity between *Funeral of a Potato* and *Palac* (*Palace*, 1980) by Krzysztof Junak, based on the novel by Wiesław Myśliwski, probably the most widely recognised Polish post-World War II writer to depict rural life. Both films portray in an unflattering manner a village community immediately after the end of the war, freely mixing reality with fantasy. Another film which may have inspired Kolski is

Konopielka (1981) by Witold Leszczynski, based on the novel by Edward Redlinski. This film, like many of Kolski's features, reveals the technological and cultural backwardness of peasant life and contains much original Eastern Polish rural dialect. Examples of Polish films about rural life are not only scarce, but prior to Kolski, there were virtually no filmmakers committed to exploring this area; after making *Konopielka* Witold Leszczynski, who seemed to understand Polish village life better than any other filmmaker, changed his interests and eventually ceased working.

This relative indifference and lack of success in depicting country life by Polish filmmakers might be regarded as ironic, as the greatest Polish literary achievements (as I will try to demonstrate later) represent rural life. Moreover, the countryside features prominently in the cinema of Poland's most influential neighbour - Soviet Union/Russia. Indeed, in my opinion there are more affinities between the work of Kolski and the Ukrainian director, Alexander Dovzhenko, and of certain films by Andrei Tarkovsky, than between Kolski and any of his Polish contemporaries or predecessors.

When discussing Kolski's cinematic connections, it is worth considering his own biography. The first years of his life he spent in the town of Lodz, regarded as the cinematic capital of Poland. He was born into a family with a long cinematic tradition, belonging to the fourth generation working in cinema. His father was a well known and highly respected film editor, his grandfather a film distributor, representing such companies as Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, Universal and Paramount, his great grandmother owned one of the first cinemas on Polish soil - Theatre Optique Parisien in Lodz. However, he did not live in Lodz all his life. In the mid-sixties, at the age of ten, he moved to a village near Lodz named Popielawy to live with his grandfather (Lubelski, 1996: 29).

This unique experience of coming from a family of film professionals, but living in the countryside, is strongly reflected in his cinema. Kolski emphasizes that his films are not "about the country", but set "in the country" (Sobolewski 1994a: 16). According to the director, making films "about the country" means using stereotypes and distancing oneself from the characters. He, on the contrary, understands perfectly peasants' customs and way of life, because he is one of them - all his films are set in the village where he lives and works, not only writing scripts, short stories and directing, but also working as a carpenter, making props and sets for his films. Similarly, his best friends come not from the ranks of film professionals, but from the village people. This desire to show authentic rural Poland is one of the reasons why he always works with the same actors: e.g. Franciszek Pieczka (who also played the main character in *The Life of Mateusz* by Witold Leszczynski), his wife Grazyna Blecka Kolska, Elzbieta Debska, Krzysztof Majchrzak and Mariusz Saniternik. Although they are professionals, they look and behave with uncharacteristic freshness. It is partly the result of the fact that they are "Kolski's actors"- hardly appearing in any other directors films, that the audience recognises them as inhabitants of the artist's own world. Moreover, most of these actors have a rural background - they, like Kolski, know the country from their personal experience, therefore it is easy for them to adopt the idiom of archaic, folk language. The minor parts are often played by non-professionals, friends of the director from Popielawy, the implicit setting of all his films: peasants, smiths, shoemakers - they just play themselves, often retaining their original names.

History

Saying that Kolski portrays rural Poland does not provide an exact description of the subject matter of his films, as what he examines is typically not the present day, but history - either past political events, which at some stage strongly influenced the lives of Polish peasants or, more often, a bygone age or dying village customs. He often refers to the history of his own family, and ultimately, to his own biography. These three dimensions of history: national, local and personal are all present in Kolski's first feature, *Pogrzeb kartofla (Funeral of a Potato, 1990)*. The main character is a leather worker, Mateusz Szewczyk, who returns to his native village after the Second World War and many years spent in a concentration camp. Although he lived in the village for most of his life and knows every man and every stone, he is treated as a stranger and enemy. His countrymen can't forgive his liberation, they call him "the Jew" (although he is not) and refuse to talk to him. This hatred stems from the peasants' greed. His relatives and friends divided his belongings amongst themselves: his tools, leather, etc. Moreover, each expected to receive some land as a result of the division of the estate belonging to the local gentry, this being part of the reforms introduced by the communist authorities. Szewczyk's return means that each of them would now receive a smaller plot. Although he understands the roots of their cruelty and injustice, their hostility horrifies him. In one of the last scenes, Mateusz stands naked in front of those who called him a Jew, crying: "People, are you worse than the occupiers?" The Polish hunger for land also shows its sinister face in a scene where one of the peasants tries to persuade his girlfriend, raped and impregnated by a Nazi soldier during the war, to seduce a communist clerk. He hopes the clerk, who will allocate the fields, will give him an extra piece as a reward for the sacrifice of his girlfriend.

The greed for land demonstrated by Szewczyk's friends can be explained by reference to Polish history. In the Eighteenth Century Poland was the object of a number of partitions between three powerful countries: Russia, Prussia and Austro-Hungary. As a result of the third partition (1795) it ceased to exist at all as a separate state, only regaining its independence after the First World War. During more than a hundred years of political oblivion, Polish peasants (in line with local landowners and the Catholic Church) played an important role in preserving Poland as a cultural and ideological community. Attached to his small piece of land, prepared to fight and die for it, the Polish farmer came to be recognized as the epitome or bastion of Polishness. His special status also resulted from the fact that he was the main challenger to communist rule, as the countryside was virtually the only place in Poland where private property was retained after 1945.

Examining Polish literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century finds a number of different attitudes to the character and historical role of peasants and the rural community in general. Great Polish Nineteenth Century authors (known as positivists), such as Boleslaw Prus (1847-1912) and Eliza Orzeszkowa (1841-1910) tended to idealise the Polish peasant. Prus' *Placowka (Outpost, 1885)*, for example, is the story of the resistance of a peasant, Jozef Slimak, against the German colonisers who sought to buy his farm. Slimak's fight for his land is almost identified with the Polish struggle to preserve its national identity. Maria Rodziewiczowna (1893-1944), one of the most popular authors in the inter-war years, did not simply idealise rural life and praise the peasant's attachment to land, but overtly promoted all forms of xenophobia, especially anti-semitism.

Other Nineteenth and Twentieth Century writers, particularly Stefan Zeromski (1864-1925) and Stanislaw Reymont (1867-1925) portrayed peasant's character and rural life in a less flattering manner. Amongst other things, Zeromski pointed out the technological and cultural backwardness of Polish agriculture and promoted extensive reforms in the laws of land

possession. Reymont's *Chłopi (Peasants)*, awarded the 1924 Nobel Prize for literature, on one hand expresses admiration for the vitality and richness of the rural culture, on the other, however, exposes peasants' poverty, greed and prejudices. Kolski understands deeply the historical context in which his character suffers. However, he seems to be closer in sentiment to Zeromski than to Rodziewiczówna, neither complimenting nor forgiving the peasants who treat Szewczyk as an enemy.

The events in *Funeral of a Potato* depict the story of Kolski's uncle. The identity of the village Popielawy, in which it is set, and characters' names are all authentic. Even the number on Szewczyk's stripped clothing (123423) is the number tattooed into his uncle's skin in the concentration camp. *Funeral of a Potato* can also be discussed in terms of "ethnographic realism". I refer here to such features as the peasants' food, details of farm equipment and clothes and the use of rustic and archaic language, with its characteristic repetitions, jargon and frequent use of neologisms. I will argue that, paradoxically, this very ethnicity was a factor in regarding Kolski's first films as "strange" or "foreign".

Another film "born" from the artist's family roots and set in his beloved Popielawy is Kolski's last feature, *The History of Cinema in Popielawy* (1998). In this film two strands of his biography and his two artistic preoccupations - cinema and country life - are intricately intertwined. The film tells the story of the Andryszek family. Andryszek the First, who was a smith, had such a rich imagination and desire to communicate his visions that he built the first cinematograph in the world. This event took place almost half a century before the inventions of Edison and the Lumiere brothers. All the succeeding generations of Andryszeks, five in total, were fascinated by the cinema. Through their history Kolski brings to life various events and customs of national and local significance. He refers, for example, to the January Uprising of 1863, when Poles fought against Russia to regain their independence. There is also an insight into the history of cinema, particularly Polish films which are now practically forgotten, although forty to fifty years ago they had audiences counted in millions. It must be emphasized that in Kolski's film cinema is not simply a stream of films, but a powerful institution in provincial Poland. What he depicts is a history of cinema in Popielawy, not in Paris or Warsaw. Ultimately, the history of the Andryszeks is a vehicle to tell the history of his own family and Jan Jakub Kolski himself.

The History of Cinema in Popielawy can be also treated as a model example of postmodern film, as it has all the features typical of this paradigm, such as nostalgia, self-reflexiveness or *mise en abime*. Consequently, in Poland it was compared to *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) by Giuseppe Tornatore (Piotrowska, 1998: 27). However, I will suggest that in a certain respect Kolski's film is even more postmodern than its Italian "antecedent". I refer to the way the director represents time - in *The History of Cinema in Popielawy* events which happened in different periods, people representing distant generations, and past and present customs seem to coexist. This can be interpreted as the artist's desire to demonstrate that history is alive, that it is or should be (re)created over and over again. At the same time, Kolski's nonchalant juxtaposing of the Nineteenth Century with the present day recollects the feature of the postmodern condition, defined by Fredric Jameson as schizophrenia. Referring to the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, Jameson describes schizophrenia as the breakdown of the relationship between signifiers.

For Lacan, the experience of temporality, human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity over months and years - this existential or experiential feeling of time itself- is also an effect of language. It is because

language has a past and a future, because the sentence moves in time, that we can have what seems to us a concrete or lived experience of time. But since the schizophrenic does not know language articulation in that way, he or she does not have our experience of temporal continuity either, but is condemned to live a perpetual present (Jameson, 1985: 119).

Jameson also claims that the media play a crucial role in helping us to forget, that they "serve as the very agents and mechanisms for our historical amnesia" (Jameson, 1985: 125).

I will argue that *The History of Cinema in Popielawy* is neither about simple remembering nor forgetting, but about their interplay, their dialectic. Similarly, cinema in Kolski's film is both an agent of immortalising and destroying history. This is because resurrecting past events or customs, either through the power of memory, or (even more so) by media, results inevitably in depriving them of their natural context and thus distorting them, transforming them into something new.

Szabla od komendanta (*Sword from the Commander*, 1995) is another of Kolski's films which represents the tension between history and its abolition. This tension results from the interplay of the subject-matter of the film and its form. The former is the importance of preserving customs. The film begins with an episode from the Polish - Bolshevik War of 1920. At a crossroad, a young soldier, Jakubek, swears on oath at the grave of his beloved, that he will come to her as soon as she calls him. Then the action switches to contemporary times; Jakubek is almost ninety years old and would like to join the love of his youth. His comrades from the war have even made a coffin for him. However, in order to die with peace of mind, he must pass his sword to a grandson to keep up the Polish military tradition, as he promised his commander, Jozef Pilsudski. Jakubek does not yet have a grandson and his only son Jan, a young biologist with a university diploma, shows no interest in marriage. Accordingly, the whole narrative revolves around persuading Jan to marry and produce a son, who can inherit the famous sword.

In contrast to the main theme of the narrative, which is continuity - passing customs, symbols and memories from father to son, from one generation to another, the narrative itself is fragmented, made up of separate episodes. Moreover, as in *The History of Cinema in Popielawy* people belonging to different epochs appear in the same time. Similarly, details of setting and iconography originate from various periods of Polish history. For example, the war, although it actually took place in 1920, looks more like the Second World War. Fruit from Jan's orchard are as monstrously large as the "mythical" (social realistic) Mitchurin fruits. The overcherished patriotic tradition of listening to Radio Free Europe, which Jakubek indulges in, suggests the 1960s. The whole contemporary part can be set anywhere between the 1950s and 1990s. All the houses look as if they were built before the Second World War and the style of clothing and decoration of the interiors suggest a timeless, rural kitsch. The difficulty in locating the narrative in a particular historical period is reinforced by the use of actors from different generations. Jakubek and his three friends from the Bolshevik war are all played by "veterans" of the Polish cinema, who gained recognition during its communist period: Bronislaw Pawlik, Franciszek Pieczka, Witold Pyrkosz and Wieslaw Golas. Jakubek's son, on the other hand, is played by a star of postcommunist cinema, Wojciech Malajkat.

Disruption of historical coherence and juxtaposing of various periods of Polish history plays a profound part in the majority of Kolski's other films. I refer here to such features as *Pograbek* (1992), *Jancio Wodnik* (*Johnnie the Aquarian*, 1993), *Playing from a Plate* and

Magneto (1993). However, it must be emphasized that not every period or epoch is used in equal proportion to produce Kolski's "temporal mixture". The iconography is typically dominated by objects dating from the late fifties and early sixties. This is a period suggested by, amongst other things, the clothes, the banknotes, the vodka and orangeade bottles and the style of cars. However, there is usually nothing about the plot which compels the author to set his stories in this period; the reason appears to be a desire to show rural Poland before its culture was influenced by the West and therefore more genuine. It was in the seventies that the first wave of Western consumerism invaded Polish towns and villages: coca-cola gradually replaced Polish orangeade, Fiats replaced Polish Syrenas and Warszawas, jeans replaced home-made clothes. Paradoxically, Kolski's ability to catch the spirit of the Polish "pre-consumer identity", completely forgotten in postcommunist times is one of the main reasons why the films are so popular among young audiences who feel rootless. Treating the fifties and sixties with sympathy and nostalgia also means that Kolski contradicts the vision of Polish history, in which the communist times are associated with utter blackness and misery, caused by totalitarianism. This relatively well-disposed attitude to the Polish communist past suits his audience, fed up with the simplified, utterly critical representations and judgements found in the majority of contemporary Polish films.

Magic

Asked why he chose the country as his subject, Kolski answered that only in the country can one see the horizon and feel the temptation to cross it, to touch the unknown, the mysterious. "There is no mystery in the town", he says in one of his interviews (Sobolewski, 1994a: 16). Actually, mysteries and miracles are present in the majority of his films. What is unique for Kolski is not so much including magic in his narratives, but his matter of fact attitude to it. In his films, as in folk ballads or in myths, unnatural phenomena do not form a separate world, but harmoniously coexist with the material reality. The "simple" peasants, in contrast to the "town people" are familiar with ultimate events, such as birth and death and are very matter of fact about the most esoteric questions, such as the nature of God and human destiny.

This familiarity of ordinary people with the magical is excellently portrayed in *Pograbek*. The eponymous hero earns his living as an undertaker and knacker; he washes and prepares the dead, but also kills horses that can no longer work. When he meets in a wood an old peasant, Kocuba, who announces that he goes to hang himself because he can't cope with his awful daughter-in-law, Pograbek accepts it as a completely natural decision and does not try to dissuade his neighbour from his plan. On the contrary, the two men start a "highly professional" discussion about what kind of tree and what type of rope is the most reliable for those who want to commit suicide. Afterwards, when Pograbek meets his ghost in the same wood, again he asks him a "professional" question: "Where is your body?" as it will be easier for him to locate the corpse this way than to search the whole night in the wood. On the other hand, no time is lost discussing abstract issues. There is nothing in the visual style of this and similar, unrealistic scenes, which suggests they belong to a different plane of existence - no violent camera movements, no unbalanced or disorientating compositions, no "angelic" iconography. On the contrary, they are shot in the same realistic way as the rest of the film.

Death is again tamed in *Sword from the Commander*, as for its main character, Jakubek, death is not so much the end of his life on Earth, as the continuation of its best part. This is because he believes that in heaven he will meet those whom he once loved and admired: his prematurely dead fiancée, his commander, his comrades from the war. Besides, the "other world" in the film does not differ much from the Polish village. In order to reach heaven, the

dead have to go through a farmyard full of manure. Saint Peter, the heavenly gatekeeper according to Christian tradition, wears peasant clothes and speaks in dialect. Even the angels sit on roosts like hens in a hen-house.

Another film, where miracles take place "on a daily basis", causing neither horror, nor particular surprise, is *Johnnie the Aquarian*. This film is of particular importance to me, as the question of miracles is combined with the problem of the place of good and evil in human nature and the world. The protagonist, a peasant from the village of Brzostowo, discovers one day that he has power over water. In his presence water appears in unexpected places and flows in unpredictable directions, violating the laws of gravity. Believing in his omnipotence and eager to use it in order to heal people, Jancio leaves his home and young wife, Weronka, who is expecting their child. He retains his miraculous power for a long time which he uses not only to help those who suffer but also for his own personal advantage. He becomes greedy, conceited and lecherous and is eventually punished: one day his power over water vanishes and all his miracles are reversed. Those who once blessed him, condemn and mock him. He decides to return home, looking for expiation and reconciliation with his abandoned wife who forgives him, although not without bitterness.

Jancio combines the features of a saint doing good through miracles, with a devil who is evil. Moreover, nobody knows the source of his power - it could as easily be pure and blessed as hellish and condemned. His son is born with a long tail which in the folk tradition is an attribute of the devil and suggests that his father came from hell. However, apart from the tail, Jancio's son is no different from other children, he is a pleasant and well behaved boy. In the end Jancio is even able to find a use for his tail - to clean the sleeve of his jacket.

Tadeusz Sobolewski, one of the Polish critics who questioned the director's moral standpoint, claims that evil, according to Kolski, forms an integral part of the world. "Evil is a creation of man, therefore the devil must be befriended and accepted", writes Sobolewski (Sobolewski, 1994b: 8). Moreover, evil is not final and absolute - what is evil in one context, may be good in another. Similarly, not everything which resembles a devil, is a devil. Consequently, there is no "moral dustbin" in Kolski's world - every man and every object has the chance to be good or to serve a good cause. Accordingly, evil creatures should rather be tamed, made gentler and better, than fought in a mortal struggle. Indeed, in Kolski's films people always have an opportunity to start their lives afresh and redeem their sins. Jancio Wodnik, for example, after returning home literally falls into a deep sleep which lasts a whole year and he is reborn as a new man. Similarly, in *Funeral of a Potato*, as previously discussed, Mateusz Szewczyk puts a harness on the necks of the village people, attaches them to a cart and uses them to plough his field. By being reduced to farm animals, the bad peasants have the opportunity to redeem their greed and cruelty.

Miracles play an important role in almost every religion. Yet, what is a sign from God in one faith, is an intervention of the devil in another. The question of good and malign miracles and their proper interpretation is central to the narrative of *Cudowne miejsce* (*Miraculous Place*, 1994). As the title suggests, there are even more miracles in the village portrayed in this film than in any of Kolski's other films. Grazyńka, a woman working in a local restaurant, is stigmatic with blood appearing on her hand and her chest, water from the village pond heals wounds and the statue of Saint Patrick moves, first pointing to the hermitage, then the lavatory standing nearby. At the beginning nobody in the village pays much attention to the miraculousness of their environment. Yet, the peasants matter of fact attitude to the mysterious events is questioned by an outsider from the city - the new Catholic priest, Father

Jakub. He comes to the village soon after completing his studies, convinced that any opinion which is not consistent with what he was taught in the theological seminary is heresy. This orthodox approach isolates him from the local people whose Catholic faith merges with pagan, animist beliefs. It also places him in conflict with the neighbouring priest, Father Andrzej. Born in the country and in common with his parishioners, he believes in the small spirits, hidden in the birds and trees, timid and less powerful than the Christian God, but helpful and benign towards ordinary people. Father Andrzej finds an old tree in the middle of a field a better place to hear the sins of his parishioners than the confessional in his church and spends most of his time outside, in the fresh air. Father Jakub, on the contrary, finds Father Andrzej a heretic, he refuses to eat "pagan" potatoes and confines himself metaphorically and literally to the church. In spite of being strict in his religious views, Father Jakub is very susceptible to worldly temptations. Faced by the miracles, he feels utterly confused and unable to help his parishioners in their daily problems. Moreover, he eventually falls in love with Grazynka. Thus he betrays his love of God and breaks his vows. He leaves the "miraculous place" looking to fulfil his vocation elsewhere. As in folk tales and as in other Kolski's films there is a lesson to be learnt from *Miraculous Place*; do not measure what is unnatural by human standards, but welcome and accept the mystery as an enrichment of human life, and do not entrench oneself in dogma, but be open to new experiences and different opinions.

The "unnatural" or "mysterious" in Kolski's films has two principal meanings; the first refers to miraculous events, people retaining god-like power, such as the ability, which Jancio Wodnik possesses, to influence the flow of water, or to attract metals with one's body, which is the case of the title character in *Magneto*. In the world, represented by Kolski, people also might be regarded as "unnatural" not because they perform conjuring "tricks", but simply because they do not fit into society or because the society does not want them to belong. This applies to people, who come from outside, who represent different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, or simply different experiences, particularly Jews. "Jewishness" in Kolski's films embodies "otherness" and "otherness", as in the case of Mateusz Szewczyk in *Funeral of a Potato*, is sometimes simply equated with being a Jew.

Many of Kolski's characters are the "others" and do not fit because they are freaks, crippled or weak-minded. They have a privileged place in Kolski's work; he calls them "God's children" and believes their experiences to be deeper than those of ordinary people because they retain perceptual faculties forgotten by others, including intuition, clairvoyance and telepathy (Wojcik, 1994: 10). Moreover, they display an open naivety, unable to hide their feelings, to act in a calculating manner or judge what is profitable for them. When they love, they love with all their strength, when they hate, they must express their hatred directly, disregarding the consequences of their behaviour. Therefore they are often abused, especially by those whom they love.

An example of a person who combines various kinds of "otherness": ethnic, physical and mental is a man called Little Turkey from *Miraculous Place*. During the Second World War, when he was a small boy, he was thrown out of a train transporting Jews to the concentration camp and was rescued by some Polish people. Nobody knew his name, his family or his roots and nobody cared. To the local people he was just a "little Jew", somebody without a true identity. Now they call him Little Turkey after his uncontrollable bird-like movements. They mock him and regard him as weak-minded, but in fact he knows much about plants and animals. He also has a more sympathetic character than others in the village - he is the only

one who cares for Grazyńska, held in contempt as a whore throughout the neighbourhood. He is always on her side in spite of her harsh words and unwelcoming behaviour.

Little Turkey understands his position as a "nobody", a "man without identity" and in his own, idiosyncratic way tries to reconstruct his destroyed past. This is symbolised by his constant search for a beautiful, white mare, which according to local legend, belonged to the Jew who owned the village inn before the war. The mare was lost in a miraculous way by its owner on the same night that the Little Turkey was found by the Poles. Little Turkey describes her in a most tender way and he is also shown as being very gentle with other animals.

Every film by Kolski contains a message which can be described as "ecological"; accordingly, human beings are only one of the many inhabitants of the Earth and have neither reason nor right to feel privileged or to behave in a superior manner towards animals and plants. People have a moral duty to treat animals as their friends and partners. Those in Kolski's films who violate this law, harming their innocent "younger brothers" are always severely punished. This is shown in *Johnnie the Aquarian* when Jancio observed Socha, an inhabitant of his parish, tethering and abandoning his old mare, sentencing her to certain death. Jancio realised that Socha did wrong, but in spite of it, did not challenge him. The event was also witnessed by an old tramp who puts a curse on the village: "Let the devil be born among you as punishment for maltreating the mare". In *Funeral of a Potato* some inhabitants of the parish burn alive two small rabbits, belonging to Szewczyk. This act is compared with burning the people in the concentration camp. Even Pogrąbek, who never intentionally harmed any animal, but on the contrary, shortened their suffering, is terrified that at the Last Judgement he will be judged by all the animals who died at his hands.

Kolski's elevation of those who are the "others", who live on the margin of society and his exaltation of animals, combined with distrust of normal people's way, is very much in tune with the postmodern presumption that a man, particularly one who is white, male, heterosexual and rational, is no longer the measure of all things and the centre of the universe. This anti-homocentric position, however, is unusual for Polish culture which either explicitly or implicitly applies the Roman Catholic perspective in which a huge gulf exists between man and the animal kingdom. Not surprisingly, his films, particularly *Johnnie the Aquarian* and *Miraculous Place*, outraged many Polish priests. Part of the Polish press, closely connected with the Church hierarchy, condemned *Miraculous Place* as "heresy". Ironically, this attitude confirms the accuracy of Kolski's diagnosis of the Catholic Church as dogmatic and intolerant.

As I previously mentioned, Kolski's particular kind of magic is characterised by his matter of fact attitude to miracles and concreteness of images of unnatural phenomena. It is very close to depictions one can find in Polish folk tales. I will also argue that there is an intimate connection between the way he represents the unnatural and fantastic imagery of two Polish poets, modernist symbolist Bolesław Leśmian (1877- 1937) and the much less known contemporary poet, Ryszard Miłczewski-Bruno (1940-1980), whose work shares similarities with surrealism. Moreover, Kolski, similar to Leśmian and Miłczewski-Bruno, displays a particular liking for terms, impossible to translate, expressing tender feelings towards ugly, lame or eccentric creatures. His "Kustyczka" (hobbler) and "Pogrąbek" (knacker), Leśmian's "kocmoluch" (dirty person) and "dusiołek" (strangler), Miłczewski-Bruno's "leluja" (fat woman) all seem to belong to the same universe. These terms recollect the language of simple, uneducated people; similarly their whole philosophy has much in common with the

pantheism which informed pre-Christian beliefs and was preserved in Poland in residual form in some pagan customs and proverbs.

When discussing miracles in Kolski's films, one should not ignore magic, resulting from the power of performances. His films include circus performances (in *Playing from a Plate* and *Magneto*), puppet shows (in *Magneto*), cinema in *The History of Cinema in Popielawy* and more spontaneous shows of trickery in *Johnnie the Aquarian*. Ordinary people attend the shows in great numbers because they have enormous appetite for miracles, which help them to escape from ordinary life, which is often full of hardship. Accordingly, the author suggests (in a subtle way commenting on his own work) that art should present something which is unusual and charming.

Apart from *Funeral of a Potato* and *Magneto* all of Kolski's films are regarded as very funny. However, Polish critics typically make no attempt to examine the sense of humour revealed in his films, limiting themselves to such descriptions as "unique" or "idiosyncratic". Although I agree that it is highly unique, its ingredients may be traced back to various traditions. What is most idiosyncratic is the way these components are mixed.

Firstly, humour results from juxtaposing the magic, unusual and sublime with the prosaic and even banal, as in the previously mentioned scene where angels are portrayed like hens in the henhouse or when Pograbek asks the ghost of the man who committed suicide where his body lies. Moreover, although some of his characters have metaphysical interests and ambition to solve the most difficult abstract questions, they are unable to overcome their peasant's practical way of thinking. When they discuss God, they imagine him as a senior village administrator, when they consider their death, they concentrate not on the passage from life to oblivion or into life in another dimension, but ponder on the quality of wood which will be used for their coffin. Often in the middle of a serious or esoteric discussion they go into such practical detail, that the primary purpose of their conversation becomes obscured; this method resembles the humour of Monty Python. The peasant's matter of fact attitude also leads to ridiculing what is sacrosanct in national tradition and mythology. This is the case of the overcherished patriotic custom of listening to Radio Free Europe, as represented in *Sword from the Commander*. The main character, Jakubek, loves the station, but can't listen to the forbidden news when the reception is too good. In such a situation he ties up a goose and pokes it with a stick, forcing it to cackle and thus make up for the Polish State radio station, whose job it is to jam Radio Free Europe. This joke can be interpreted as an ironic comment on Polish difficulties with freedom - Poles can only appreciate something when it is forbidden. Comedy appears also when magic enters the official life, as in the episode in *Magneto*, when at the unveiling of a monument, dedicated to some Russian Soldiers, the magnetic power of the title character strips the Stalinist officials' military uniforms of their numerous medals, disrupting the pompous speeches.

The second type of humour is verbal; it results from the words, expressions and accents used by Kolski's characters. The best example is the previously mentioned "Pograbek" (whose closest English translation, as I previously mentioned, is "knacker"), a word which does not exist in any dictionary of Polish language. The word is sophisticated in its shortness and simplicity, contrasting with the copious words Poles use to express even simple thoughts, indicating the inventiveness and intelligence of peasants. Many words and constructions used by inhabitants of Kolski's mythical village are transformed versions of terms, used by "city people". This applies particularly to scientific terms and expressions, such as "zaplemniki", which is a combination of "plemnik" (sperm) and "zarodek" (embryo). It is used by Jancio

Wodnik, who pretends to know a lot about science, but has a very vague idea of the difference between female and male biology. "Zaplemnik" is also a good example of a close connection between comedy, magic and superstition. This case and many similar are a perfect testimony to Ludwig Wittgenstein's claim that the borders of one's language define the border's of one's life - there is perfect harmony between the language used by Kolski's characters and their whole attitude to the world.

Another form of comedy in Kolski's films results from Camp. In her famous essay, "Notes on 'Camp'" Susan Sontag distinguishes between naive and deliberate Camp. Naive Camp usually results from the situation of failed seriousness (Sontag, 1994: 283). Accordingly, Kolski's narratives are full of situations and images of failed seriousness on the part of their characters, of peasants' ambitions which do not match their possibilities. A perfect example is Jancio, who pretends to have wider horizons than his contemporaries and using money, earned by performing miracles, tries to buy "city" pleasures, without realising that not everything that is good or appropriate for urban people, suits peasants. He looks ridiculously feminine in the shiny, kitsch clothes and out of place in the company of city "gejszas". An even more ludicrous event takes place when he is rewarded with a brand new "Warszawa", a Polish limosine constructed in the fifties. As Jancio can't drive and like a typical Polish peasant regards this costly gift as too good to be used, he asks for the car to be transported to his farmyard where his neighbours can admire and envy it. Consequently, ten men carry the enormous car on their shoulders in order to leave it in front of Jancio's house. Another film saturated with this kind of humour is *Pograbek*. One of its main characters is a "local Casanova", called Heniek Miterka, whom Pograbek asks to impregnate his wife, Kustyczka, when all the couple's plans to have a child fail. Miterka tries desperately to be as romantic, chivalrous, elegant and cosmopolitan as a film amant, but does not succeed. His Sunday clothes, exaggerated gestures and elaborated, rhymed compliments with which he favours Kustyczka, are not urban, as he hopes, but simply kitsch and therefore ridiculous. One observes the same discrepancy between the earnest and ambitious intentions and the miserable results in the appearance of the interiors of wealthy peasants.

Susan Sontag states that "Many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, *demode*" (Sontag, 1994: 285). Indeed, in many cases the effect of Camp in Kolski's films results simply from the outmodedness of the objects represented, the fact that Polish fashion of the sixties, which is the director's favourite period, especially its rural version, nowadays epitomizes a pure, "serene" kitsch.

In *Pograbek* and *Johnnie the Aquarian* the director represents Camp as if it already existed in the village, waiting to be filmed. This naive Camp is the most satisfying in his films. This is, however, not the only form of Camp Kolski depicts. The other results from stylization, from making the lives of peasants look more poetic than they are in reality. This kind of Camp is widespread in his later films, particularly *Playing from a Plate*. Many scenes in this film look as if they were carefully arranged to recollect pictures of Jacek Malczewski, the Nineteenth Century artist and the main representative of Polish symbolism, who specialised in painting angels, flowers and dreamy peasants in elaborate poses, while performing simple tasks, like harvesting. Similarly, Kolski's film is full of images of women in white dresses with wings and peasants looking dreamily far away. Malczewski can be regarded as a Polish equivalent of the Pre-Raphaelites. His work is treated in Poland with the greatest seriousness, art critics almost compete with each other in finding metaphorical meanings for his pictures. However, it can be argued that with its elaborate, exaggerated form, unsuitable for its trivial content, Malczewski's work is the Polish prototype of Camp and it was this quality which attracted

Kolski to his paintings. Similarly, the language used by characters in *Playing from a Plate* is different from the matter of fact talk typical of peasants in Kolski's earlier films - it is more stylised and artificial, with long, elaborate expressions and difficult words. Obscure subjects are no longer treated by peasants as practical problems, but examined in their whole esotericism. This kind of Camp is much less satisfying, less playful.

Humour in Kolski's films is also produced by cinematic intertextuality and self-reflexiveness. This refers particularly to *Johnnie the Aquarian*, the film most saturated with "internal" clichés and witticisms. Unfortunately, as with verbal humour, this is only understandable to Polish audiences. For example, one of the characters, a man who earns his living performing tricks with his stigmatic wounds is played by Boguslaw Linda, the most famous contemporary actor. Linda, who specialises in the parts of deadly serious hard men, is associated almost exclusively with urban genres, such as thrillers and gangster dramas, particularly the "Tarantino-like" box office hits by Wladyslaw Pasikowski. Consequently, his very presence in the rural landscape adds an element of comedy to the film.

From the perspective of Kolski's whole career one can also risk the statement that there is a self-irony in his portrayal of Jancio Wodnik. It is worth remembering here Jancio's trajectory - from a simple peasant turned self-confident local "celebrity", he was then punished for his conceit and sought expiation. Eventually he fell asleep and woke up as a "new man". This resembles closely his creator's own career - he started as a humble artist, who picked up subjects dismissed by other filmmakers and was barely noticed by critics. This changed, however, with *Johnnie the Aquarian*, which received three awards at the Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia and was praised by virtually everyone. In a similar way Kolski became very self-confident and "greedy" - he made two films in one year and was even accused of depriving other filmmakers of state money. He then seemed to lose his talent - *Sword from the Commander* and *Playing from a Plate* were regarded as failures in his native country. The last stage of Jancio's story can be compared with Kolski's long break from directing feature films after this failure and being re-born with the making of *The History of Cinema in Popielawy*, regarded by many critics as his masterpiece.

Conclusions

In my article I attempted to demonstrate that Kolski is a model Magic Realist as the value and charm of his films lie in skillfully combining extremes: authenticity with magic, parochialism and autobiography with universalism, ostentatious outmodedness with postmodernity. I also wanted to show that his work plays an important cultural, and even political role in Polish society. By borrowing from the local tradition, their allusions to a forgotten language, beliefs, myths and customs and their ridiculing of those who forget their cultural roots and pretend that they are better than they are, Kolski's films urge us not to follow Western ways uncritically, not to lose our own old identity by immersing ourselves in the global culture. Moreover, with their relatively well-disposed attitude to the communist past, great interest in those who live at the margins of society, and most of all, their warm-hearted humour, his films play a cathartic and therapeutic role, serving as a tool for national reconciliation in a society deeply divided over its past. My hope is that Kolski's work, following the example of other Magic Realists, particularly Andrei Tarkovsky and Alexander Sokurov, will broaden its appeal to an international audience without losing its relevance to Polish culture.

Appendix

Jan Jakub Kolski

Biographical details

Born in 1956. From 1976 to 1981 worked as a lighting cameraman in Wrocław Television. Between 1981 and 1985 he studied at the Łódź Film School. Since 1982 he directed over twenty short films, among them the prize winning *Najpiękniejsza jaskinia świata* (*The Most Beautiful Cave in the World*, 1988) and *Ladny dzień* (1988). In the 1990s he also directed videoclips for music performed by Grzegorz Ciechowski.

Filmography

1990- *Pogrzeb kartofla* (*Funeral of a Potato*)

1992- *Pograbek*

1993- *Magneto*

1993- *Jancio Wodnik* (*Johnnie the Aquarian*)

1994- *Cudowne miejsce* (*Miraculous Place*)

1995- *Szabla od komendanta* (*Sword from the Commander*)

1995- *Grajacy z talerza* (*Playing from a Plate*)

1998- *Historia kina w Popielawach* (*The History of Cinema in Popielawy*)

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