
“We Won’t Eat You, Dear”: The Collision of Class, Scales, and Body Horror in 'The Lure'

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Promotional image provided, with thanks by Kino Świat

Heralded as a Polish cannibal horror mermaid musical, *The Lure* was released theatrically in the United States in early 2017 – no easy feat for a low-budget debut of a newcomer, Agnieszka Smoczyńska. Written by an acclaimed young Polish playwright and screenwriter, Robert Bolesło, the film “is inspired by the kitschy world of big dancehall parties from the era of communism” and revolves around two teenage mermaids, Silver and Golden, and their rocky journey towards adulthood.^[i] Interestingly, Western mainstream reviewers, while applauding *The Lure* for its dizzying display of phantasmagorical sequences and noting its not-too-subtle commentary on girlhood and female desire, have failed to see its political undertones.^[ii] The reason for this omission may be simply cultural differences that make it difficult for Western reviewers to trace the intricate web of social and political references and allusions, which is why they concentrate instead on the (supposedly) universal cinematic language, popular fairy-tale tropes, and familiar horror imagery. What is more, in contrast to other popular Polish films which have been warmly received by the West (such as *The Collector*, Feliks Falk, 2005; *Aftermath*, Władysław Pasikowski, 2012; *Ida*, Paweł Pawlikowski, 2013;

Spoor, Agnieszka Holland and Kasia Adamik, 2017), *The Lure* does not wear its political badge proudly and visibly, and Western audiences do not get a piece of Polish political history served to them on a silver platter together with footnotes and easily accessible explanations. If anything, the politics of *The Lure* is elusive, meandering, and concealed in the myriad details, resonances, and obscure allusions that populate the screen and which, more often than not, resemble afterthoughts and afterimages rather than a straight-forward social commentary.

The way I will use politics throughout this essay echoes Rosi Braidotti's distinction between politics and the political (or "LA politique" and "LE politique"), with the former being a form of organized, majoritarian politics "made of progressive emancipatory measures" and the latter understood as "radical self-styling" and "transformative experimentation with new arts of existence and ethical relations."^[iii] Granted, *The Lure* does not offer much in the way of "la politique," as it does not engage with majoritarian narratives of Polish history. It does engage with the concept of "le politique" in that it enters into a multi-person dialogue with everyday Polish history (rather than the official History), popular music genres, the Polish entertainment scene of the 1980s, a variety of associations with mermaids and, more generally, Polish Romanticism. I would like to argue that these discursive layers cannot be extricated from the material planes, as *The Lure* also activates synaesthetic sensations and affective states that lead the viewers in and out of mnemonic trips, detours, and cul-de-sacs of the past.

The Lure is not an empty eggshell of a film that is all form and glitter, and no real substance at all. This is not to say that films need to transcend their form in order to lay high-brow, abstract nourishment at the viewers' feet. Rather, all films are always already political and politicised, but some varieties of political engagement and social commentary are more difficult to identify than others or might be located on the affective rather than the discursive plane. Clearly, the two mermaid sisters' savagery and frailty could be read solely in terms of female monstrosity, an uncanny fear of female genitalia, the horror of menarche, taboo fantasies of slippery hybridity and nonhuman sexuality (to name just a few potential avenues for analysis), but I would also like to examine how a different type of social commentary is proposed by Smoczyńska with and through her employment of the horrific, the surreal, and the fantastic.

In the first part I will briefly comment on my methodology and the ways the discursive-material approach may benefit from Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis. Then I move on to the figure of a mermaid (*syrena*) in Polish culture, and the ways in which *The Lure* imbricates itself in the discussion concerning the emergence of Polish middle-class and its attendant fears and anxieties. Thirdly, following the debate concerning

social groups and classes in Poland, I would like to look at the uneasy relationship between the savvy capital city dwellers and the unpolished, yet hugely talented, outsiders, which can be traced through the deceptively simple lyrics of one of film's dazzling musical numbers. Lastly, I am interested in the ways in which *The Lure* stylizes itself as a nostalgic nod towards the 1980s and how the horror is used to comment on and undercut this nostalgia.

Beyond the Screen: A word on methodology

My own work is heavily indebted to Anna Powell's insightful book-length study *Deleuze and Horror* and her series of shorter articles on the potential applications of both Deleuze's *Cinema I* and *II* books and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's schizoanalytic approach developed mostly in their two-volume opus magnum, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Though Deleuze concentrated on auteur and canonical cinema in his own writing on cinema, Powell convincingly argues for schizoanalytical readings of popular and mainstream films. Horror films, in particular, "are strong on affective impact and offer an intensive experience of fear and desire."[\[iv\]](#) And thus Powell's comment on the aesthetics of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) can be applied to a number of contemporary horror productions: "[t]hey stimulate, repel, frighten, distress and disorientate the spectator in a dizzying vortex, schizophrenising us as we lose the clear distinction of inside and out during the film even."[\[v\]](#)

In her analysis of Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy* (2004), Powell employs three types of books theorized by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*: the root, the radicle, and the rhizome.[\[vi\]](#) While the arborescent or root book reflects the world without much consideration and replicates hierarchies and social formations, the second type, the radicle book, though cut off from the main root or maimed through formal experimentation, retains the structure and unity of the root and offers an imitation of the world rather than something entirely new. Finally, the rhizome book "is a much more conjunctive, inclusive and productive assemblage," which connects disparate elements, or singularities, through a simple gesture of addition rather than through a complex chain of signification or cause and effect.[\[vii\]](#)

The Lure could also be read through these three types of organization, which, as should be stressed, are not mutually exclusive and can intertwine freely. As a root text, *The Lure* revolves around a well-known fairy tale (Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid") set within the framework of a sparkly retro musical and a tragicomic coming-of-age story. The plot is thus highly predictable and the gory ending comes as no

surprise. As a radicle text, *The Lure* self-reflexively comments on the figure of a Polish mermaid (which, in turn, generates a number of Romantic, urban, and communist associations), and attempts to break out of the constraints of a conventional musical by relying on idiosyncratic, eerie lyrics, whose role in pushing the plot forward is tangential at best. In *The Lure's* case, the radicle smoothly intersects with the rhizomatic organization. It is within this last perspective that one can see the conjunctive synthesis of singularities, whose coupling rests on the flow of generative desire rather than a negative lack and a longing for the lost past. The affectionate nostalgia for the 1980s that *The Lure* espouses is celebrated and exaggerated, but also made horrific and uncanny. The “distinctive innovations” (or singularities, as Deleuze and Guattari call them) that are joined in *The Lure* encompass an excess of themes, which was jokingly noted by many reviewers in the tongue-in-cheek description of the film as a cannibal mermaid musical horror.^[viii] This surplus of tropes and genres amuses and surprises, but they do actually work in Smoczyńska's film.

Perhaps the most useful conceptual tool used to describe the cinematic event that is *The Lure* is the concept of a body without organs (BwO). Deleuze and Guattari describe BwO as “glacial reality where the alluvions, sedimentations, coagulations, folding, and recoiling that compose an organism – and also a signification and a subject – occur.”^[ix] The two competing *and* cooperating directions – towards chaos and towards organization inform the way *The Lure* can be experienced by a viewer. Each stratum, each chain of signification, each instance of hierarchized order, each social formation that *The Lure* surveys is shaken and disturbed by lines of flight striving towards experimentation and smooth space. The most visible social formation that *The Lure* investigates is, of course, the late 1980s communist Warsaw and its dance hall scene. And yet as I would like to argue later this highly specific temporal and material setting does not serve as a mere retro backdrop or politically moot nod to the past, but rather works as a mnemonic and affective bridge that highlights a potential social critique of the present.

Powell notes that, for Deleuze and Guattari, artistic assemblages “ha[ve] nothing to do with ideology” as “ideologies are inevitably bound by the existing regimes of signification and representation in their milieu, and they replicate its structures. Art, meanwhile has nothing to do with signifying.”^[x] It is the affective potentialities of art that interest Deleuze and Guattari, and Powell, respectively. Powell in *Deleuze and Horror* does not reject methodologies concerned more directly with discourse, power, and the political, but rather wishes to supplement them with schizoanalytic and materialist perspectives. Still, reading horror cinema solely through affective and materialist lens runs the risk of creating yet another formalist dogma divorced from wider cultural, political, and

economic concerns. It would seem that such questions are especially pertinent in reference to horror cinema, a genre historically entangled with racism, sexism, misogyny, transphobia and homophobia, and objectification of female bodies, to name just a few cringe-worthy misalliances. Focusing on the schizoanalytic mantra of “the brain is the screen”, to the exclusion of culturally mediated meanings and discursive responses, creates an artificial division of studies concerned with the political and those concerned with the affective. Barbara Kennedy, the author of *Deleuze and the Cinema of Sensation*, when discussing Kathryn Bigelow’s *Strange Days* (1995) and its hyperviolent and highly stylized scenes of rape and murder, points to the risk of losing track of political implications of violence and its cinematic representations.[\[xi\]](#) For the very same reason, I remain sceptical about dismissing questions of representation and discursive analysis of cultural texts.[\[xii\]](#) My own approach benefits not only from feminist new materialist appreciation of intra-active entanglements and schizoanalysis, but also from feminist politics of location and more traditional perspectives developed in the 1980s and 1990s by feminist scholars of cinema and culture.

Dangerous Mermaids and Fragile Middle-classes

Even though *The Lure* only references two popular mermaid tropes directly: mythological sirens’ power to sway their male prey with their singing and Hans Christian Andersen’s rather gloomy and disheartening “The Little Mermaid,” one can follow other mermaids, other themes, other singularities as well. The act of following, as Deleuze and Guattari define it, belongs to the realm of nomadic rather than royal scientific procedures, and does away with the latter’s fixation on reproduction, deduction, and “the permanence of a fixed point of view that is external to what is reproduced.”[\[xiii\]](#) To follow is then to search for “the ‘singularities’ of a matter, or rather of a material,” which in this case is Smoczyńska’s film and its mermaid themes.[\[xiv\]](#)

Tracing all the meanings accrued by the figure of a mermaid in Polish culture and arts exceeds the scope of this essay, but two themes deserve a closer look. The fact that the mermaid sisters decide to surface in Warsaw rather than at the seaside connects directly with the Mermaid of Warsaw, a half-woman, half-fish hybrid with a shield and raised sword, the city’s symbol dating back to 14th century, included in its coat of arms, and present in its cityscape in manifold forms: street names, monuments, statues, bas-reliefs, neon lights, not to mention “syrenka” gadgets and memorabilia lurking in every tourist shop and museum in the capital.[\[xv\]](#) Interestingly, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw opened its doors in March 2017 with an inaugural exhibition devoted to the mythological

siren and its “cultural connotations [as] Warsaw’s symbol, and its universality in the context of creating a modern urban identity.” [xvi] The exhibition title, “The Beguiling Siren is Thy Crest,” comes from a poem by one of Poland’s leading romantic poets, which points to another salient meaning of a mermaid as featured in the “uncanny Slavdom.” This term, theorized by a renowned scholar of Polish literature and culture, Maria Janion, stands for brutally repressed pre-Christian folk and pagan traditions hopelessly entangled with an unacknowledged guilt as an Eastern European colonizer. [xvii]

What one finds in Janion’s book is “a postcolonial Polish mentality [that] can be defined as a combination, or a vicious circle....of a sense of inferiority toward the [Latin, Christianized, civilized] west and of superiority toward the [pagan, uncivilized] east.” [xviii] This West/East split, as I argue later, has also been restructured along the classist city-countryside axis. Agata Pyzik in *Poor but Sexy: Culture Clashes in Europe East and West*, also looks to Janion’s uncanny Slavdom for explanation behind the lack of coherent identity among Poles. Poland’s double-status as a country that was repeatedly colonized by multiple invaders, but which also acted as an active colonizer of Eastern European lands forms the crux of uncanny Slavdom. And while the colonized status has been enshrined in highly popular romantic notion of Poland as “the Christ of nations,” its colonizing position has been all but disavowed or turned into manic fantasies of Great Poland. [xix] The issues of power, guilt, martyrology, and in(ter)dependence are tightly connected with the spectral images of Poland as a triumphant, virulent, and revolutionary masculinity and as a desecrated, frail, and melancholic femininity. In this context, Golden and Silver play with such gendered visions of Poland and its people popularized during Polish Romanticism. [xx] While the two sisters bewitch Warsaw with their siren call, and colonize the desires of everyone they encounter, Silver is concurrently colonized by her own desire to become a human girl. As Janion skilfully argues, the Slavic presence resurfaced in Polish Romantics’ writing in the form of All Hallows’ Eve pagan rituals, the figures of dryads, rusalkas, and specters, dark and earthy magic, and the occult. From this perspective, the mermaids in *The Lure* mark a violent and inevitable return of brutal past, unresolved traumas, and undisclosed shame. They are outsiders because of their pre-Christian and nonhuman origins, and they point to the lie behind the myth of the Mermaid of Warsaw – they have come ashore to eat men rather than protect them. And even though the two sisters initially take to the city and its people, ultimately there is no place for them in this reality. They become an embarrassment, a broken instrument, an obsolete remnant of a past that promised so much but delivered so little.

A different take on the Polish mentality is offered by Andrzej Leder in his

Prześlona Rewolucja: ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej (Over-dreamt Revolution: Exercises in Historical Logic), in which he formulates an interesting, if controversial, thesis about modern-day Polish middle-classes and their lack of cohesion and political self-awareness. Utilizing a psychoanalytic perspective, he argues that Poles “slept through” a two-part social revolution which took place between 1939 and 1956, the former being the Holocaust (and for all intents and purposes an annihilation of an emergent Jewish middle-class) and the latter being the elimination of aristocracy and landed gentry via nationalization and manumission carried out by communist regime in the first decade after the World War II. Because contemporary middle-classes refuse to acknowledge their forefathers’ and foremothers’ role in and moral responsibility for these purges, they remain caught between two phantasmatic (and phantasmagorical) pseudo-identities: a pre-war idyllic lifestyle of Polish landed gentry (whose power and economic stability rested on feudalism and de facto enslavement of peasants that continued well into late nineteenth century) and a borrowed Westernized (globalized) dream of consumerism and neoliberal market relationships. Leder locates the second stage of the emergence of Polish middle-class in the late 1980s and early 1990s transition era, where certain practices and habitual ways of thinking coalesced around a new modern Polish middle-class.[\[xxi\]](#)

This introduction to modern-day Polish identity is crucial if one is to understand one of the central motifs in Smoczyńska’s movie – the lure of a big urban metropolis and its effect on naïve, if dangerous, outsiders from the country. This uneasy relationship is played out through a song by *Ballady i Romanse*, “I came to the city,” which appears soon after the two sisters land a gig as backup singers and strippers at the dance hall, *Adria*. Since the official English translation smoothes out the ambiguities embedded in the lyrics I translated a few lines in a more direct, if less poetic, way. The musical number, probably the biggest and most difficult to stage in the whole film, chronicles the girls’ makeover.[\[xxii\]](#) The singer – *Kryśia* – wearing a fur coat and elegant hat cuts through an unruly crowd waiting in a disorderly queue in front of the iconic Warsaw department store – *Sezam*. The three enter brightly-lit, all-white space with two escalators (an icon of modernity associated with communist-era department stores) and shelves filled with Western products (though in a true PRL fashion the shelves are not all that full).[\[xxiii\]](#) A giddy collective dance number follows. Their playfulness is reminiscent of kids having fun in a big store, but being placed in a shopping cart also points to their status as yet another product. But by becoming a product, *Golden* and *Silver* also point to the fact that their newly-acquired urban identity rests on visual markers and as such this identity can be bought, stylized, and copied (successfully or unsuccessfully). After a compulsory catwalk scene, the mermaids are ready to take on Warsaw, symbolized by its most iconic

communist-era architectural piece - the Palace of Culture and Science - a highly contested gift from the Soviets. Together with an all-girl school trip and dozens of teenagers, they drive to the top of the Palace to take in the view. Still, the view is not shown to the audience, and the camera focuses rather on the two girls, now happily joining in the song with Kryisia and the dancing crowds. The happy song ends on a darker note when Silver faints after swirling too fast, while her dark-haired sister, Golden, takes over the lyrical focalization and ends the song with "Hands that got dirty doing dirty deeds / and their admiration / such a pity to look at."

Throughout the song the city is presented consistently as a place which is full of mind-boggling smells and flavours, sites and objects such as neon lights, cars, pigeons, horns, potted plants, and escalators. But, most importantly, the city "will tell us what we lack," as the chorus repeatedly explains over the sound of an ecstatic response: "YES-YES-YEESSS!" Still, the first couple of lines introduce confusing intentions and desires: "I came to the city / I wanted to present my best self / to change, change anything / to turn heads / she turned everything back." The last two lines play on the verb "zwrócić," which might mean both "to take something back," "to return" but also "to vomit." The following three lines present a stark contrast with the fantastic vision of the department store extravaganza and bright lights: "Wings cut by disgusting cadaver (of life itself) / I walk through the city / everywhere smog and pollution." It would seem city life is not all neon lights and flower beds; urban makeover requires sacrifices, which foreshadows the film's tragic ending.

The apparent tension between the sophisticated urbanites and the crude newcomers has been a hot topic for many years now in the Polish media. The derogatory names circulating both in the press and seeping into everyday language point at people who "do the urban living" wrong - they are called "słoiki" (jars) or "lemmingi" (lemmings), or in the context of Warsaw, "warszafka" (little Warsaw). Even though all three designations have emerged in different political and cultural contexts and apply to different imagined social groups, in each case certain lifestyles or habits are deemed unsatisfactory and excessive; all three groups are accused of failed mimicry, lower than average intelligence, and impropriety. In most cases it is suggested that their mistakes stem from being outsiders who ineptly pretend to be urbane and urban. Thus, the two mermaids singing "I came to the city / I wanted to present my best self" comments on how the newcomers are typecast by the city dwellers (who sometimes have spent only a few years more in the city than the urban neophytes). The commentary seems both naïve and ironic at the same time. The musical number exudes such unabashed joy (visually, aurally, tactilely) at discovering Sezam - the PRL temple of (limited) consumerism - that the viewers are caught in an affective tide of bright

images, verbal and non-verbal nostalgia. A catchy pop melody triggers a kinaesthetic desire to dance with/to the song. And, finally, Polish viewers over the age of thirty are flooded with half-forgotten memories of never-ending queues, semi-religious visits to a department store, and a mandatory school trip to the Palace or simply to the capital. Still, the figure of a simple girl from the country, a stock character of so many vicious jokes in Poland's memosphere, cannot be easily set aside, and the words "to change / to change anything / to turn heads" sound ironic and cruel, especially in the light of later events. The two ingénues, Silver and Golden, who truly are the epitome of the uncouth, ill-mannered, marginal Other invading the urban centre, represent different ways of adapting to the big city and its harsh lights. In the beginning, the two sisters relish the city's jobs, clothes, cigarettes, vodka, music, and quirky individuals, but the moment they begin to look for something more (Silver for Mietek's love and Golden for an independent life and their father's acceptance), they realize the city's offer is limited to the play of surfaces, cheap nylon, and incandescent lights. They are an unwelcome disruption because their somewhat funny, somewhat sad attempts to mimic proper urban lifestyle actually reveal not only a performative nature of middle-classness, but also the fact that everyone is already involved in mimicking and copying other, supposedly more sophisticated (that is, Western) fashions and trends.[\[xxiv\]](#)

Terrific and Terrifying: The Horror and Nostalgia of the 1980s

On the one hand I find it striking that *The Lure's* temporal setting went largely unnoticed by Western commentators. On the other, I am painfully aware that the Polish 1980s are usually read through the Solidarity movement, the Martial Law (1981-1983) as well as pervasive visual drabness and low-key melancholy perhaps captured best in Krzysztof Kieślowski's *The Decalogue* (1989). And yet, the so-called transition from communism to capitalism had already begun in the second half of the 1980s. Even before the political transformation of 1989 and the ensuing neoliberal shock therapy of the early 1990s took place, Western pop-cultural texts, selected economic practices, lifestyles, and fashions had been seeping into Polish reality via official and unofficial channels. The resulting mish-mash of old and new trends, competing ideas, peripheral and centric systems of signification (which were indistinguishable to an untrained post communist eye of the consumer) meant that the transition era was also a time symbolized by excess and cultural overcoding. That excess was marked specifically by the embarrassing (and embarrassed) subject who enacted capitalism or the West incorrectly and desperately tried to find a bearing in a rapidly changing reality.

But everyday life was more than meets the camera eye. Resting their eyes from a dull palette of mustard yellows and earthy browns associated with state-controlled public spaces (bars, trains, schools, buildings), women enjoyed joyous excess of sequins and neon hues, puffed-up perms, large shoulder pads, vivid eyeshadows, while men experimented with *Miami Vice* loose suits in light colours, polo shirts, New Romantic thin ties, mullets and carefully groomed facial hair. Pyzik argues that Western popular culture reached Poland only in the late 1980s, but because state-owned media favored high-brow production, Poles “didn’t have permissiveness for schlock.”^[xxv] And because Poles did not have time and space to develop an ironic attitude towards low-brow entertainment and, as a consequence, took Western pop culture seriously and, to some extent, reverentially, they also lacked “postmodern easiness or ironic distance towards the schlock.”^[xxvi] One could argue that Smoczyńska’s film with its frenzy of intensities (colours, lights, textiles, textures, synthesizers, voices) is not citing the 1980s from a safe (ironic) distance. In fact, *The Lure* manages to remain both very close to and quite far from the dance halls of the 1980s. Its intimate absorption in the past is revealed, for instance, in the first long shot of Adria where camera accompanies the club’s boss as he searches for the “fishy” smell and checks on his employees. The camera captures a series of familiar PRL stereotypes (oily pony-tailed bouncer, waiters in black-and-white tackling unruly customers, busy kitchen ladies and their hypersexualized supervisor), which in my own case has triggered a wave of rhizomatic conjunctions of screen-shots, photographs, scenes from the 1980s cultural texts as well as my own life. Still, at one point the camera forgets about its role of trailing the boss and instead lingers behind to get closer look at a woman dancing by herself in an almost empty room. The gesture disrupts the narrative focus and reminds the viewers of the camera’s line of flight away from structure in order to spy on the lithe dancer.

This nostalgic closeness becomes unbearable in the scenes set in the musicians’ two-room flat, in which three people and two mermaids live side by side crammed in spaces already besieged by ugly furniture, cheap knick-knacks, leopard print blankets, and dreary wallpaper. Still, as in any other film marked by postmodern nostalgia, the past looks a bit brighter, a bit more vivid, and simply more enticing than it actually was. In this sense, *The Lure* keeps its distance from the past. Underneath the glam, the frenzy, and the somewhat unfocused, glazed looks of all the human characters, the colours are still deep, the little details unnervingly on target, and the schlock both corn-fed (it is Eastern Europe, after all) and classy (Western) at the same time.

Pyzik reacts strongly against the contemporary boom for nostalgia of the East (sometimes called *Ostalgie* in German): retro-dining and vodka tours, rediscovery of 1960s-1980s music genres, renewed appreciation

for socrealist architecture and art, newfound affinity for communist-era furniture, clothing, patterns, design, typography, etc. For Pyzik such nostalgic attachments are a way of reliving the trauma of the transition without openly addressing what really happened during the early 1990s. It is safer, according to her, to look back with nostalgia (or condemnation, sometimes both) at the communist regime rather than to analyze what happened during the implausibly brutal shock therapy of the early 1990s. More than that, she links nostalgia and aestheticization of the communist period with political passivity. [xxvii] Various iterations of this anti-nostalgia argumentation appear also in connection to highly successful Polish mainstream films that deal with actual historical figures: *Wałęsa. Człowiek z nadziei* (Andrzej Wajda, 2013), *Bogowie* (Łukasz Palkowski, 2014), and *Sztuka Kochania* (Maria Sadowska, 2017). The painstaking meticulous efforts to bring PRL back to life on screen (using specific types of potted plant, the right hue of wooden panelling, the use of yellow filter, etc.) unearth a material longing for PRL that effectively undercuts the discursively expressed condemnation of PRL political repression and brutality. However, in defence of nostalgia, Dominik Bartmanski argues that “[b]eyond idolizing, longing, missing or ironizing, there are other distinct modes of successful engagement with a failed past.” [xxviii] In other words, instead of reading nostalgia exclusively as a melancholic desire for a failed and irrevocably lost past, he sees the role of certain visual artefacts, architectural sites, and cultural practices as mnemonic bridges to the communist past and ways towards a potential, if not reconciliation, then understanding.

Patricia Pisters writes that the paradigm shift proposed by Deleuze for film studies moves “from considering cinema and the spectator as a ‘disembodied eye’ (defined by the look and the gaze, desire and identification) to considering cinema and the spectator as an embodied brain (defined by perception – even illusory ones –, selections – even random ones –, memories – even fake ones –, imaginations, suggestions and above all emotions as pure affect).” [xxix] The concept of an embodied brain offers a way to tackle discursive-material entanglements of *The Lure* and to move beyond conventional interpretations that focus on narrowly defined discursive elements (such as dialogue or plot). What is at stake is not simply adding “the material” to “the discursive” (as this sets up a false dichotomy and a non-existent boundary), but rather showing how the discursive is always already material and vice versa. For instance, the fishy smell, to which characters allude to a number of times, triggers olfactory sensations associated with marinated herring+pickles+vodka+cigarettes (which, sans the cigarettes, forms now a clichéd vignette resurrected in popular vodka bars mushrooming in Eastern European cities). Half-forgotten, half-fabricated memories of late-night celebrations of countless name days from my early childhood swing gently between pleasantness and unpleasantness, joy and anxiety, and as

such, mirror the nostalgic trajectory explored in *The Lure*.

One could ask, then, what role *The Lure's* horrific elements play. Do they exclusively serve as a vehicle for the monstrous feminine, fear of pollution associated with young women's sexuality, and the spectre of vampiric lesbianism that threatens to destabilize patriarchal system of signification? Or can they be understood differently as well? I would like to argue that the horror of *The Lure* resides not only in the mermaids' inhuman (and feminine) monstrosity, but also in the film's relationship to the past it imagines and the human (and non-human) interactions it shows. In this sense, Smoczyńska's movie taps into a vision of the social horrific reminiscent of Piotr Szulkin's 1980s SF cinema, in which he employed typical SF tropes such as an alien invasion and post apocalyptic themes.^[xxx] Despite their official SF generic affiliations, Szulkin's low-budget movies (*The War of the World: Next Century*, 1981; *O-Bi, O-Ba: The End of Civilization*, 1985; *Ga, Ga - Glory to the Heroes*, 1986) are often remembered as *the* horror cinema of the 1980s, as they locate the horrific in everyday malice and in human penchant for sadism, boiling underneath the surface and just waiting to burst through the thin veneer of sociality and sociability. The horror of social relations is also mentioned by Pyzik, who comments on the perceived unfriendliness and brusqueness of Poles, often noted by outsiders.^[xxxi] Poles do not smile; they are intolerant, mistrustful, and unwilling to help each other, but they are more than happy to engage in aggressive verbal and physical altercations. It is unclear whether Pyzik tries to trace the origins of these stereotypes or treats the supposed Polish hardness as a fact in need of deconstruction. Arguably, she manages the former, but not the latter.^[xxxii] Still, if taken as a telling stereotype, boorishness and cruelty, often associated with the so-called hardening of Poles under the communist regime, reveals itself not only in the violent resolution of Golden and Silver's encounter with the city, but also in the myriad little indignities suffered by the characters and their brusque exchanges, which culminate in the musicians' family *mêlée*.

When the family begin to suspect that the mermaids might be behind a ghastly murder, they try to get rid of them by knocking them unconscious, wrapping their bodies in carpets, and, finally, throwing them into the Vistula river. What follows is one of the film's most horrific scenes in which the mother, father, and son fight wildly and uncontrollably in their tiny flat. Stripped to their underwear, they seem drunk on violence and self-hatred. When it is over, their flat resembles a war zone, while their sprawling, black and blue bodies seem dead. It is hard to say whether the violent outburst is caused by guilt or maybe represents a belated reaction to the mermaids, or a curse-like madness bestowed by the two sisters. In a dream-like sequence, another singer comes to their flat with a drip feed to bring them back to life. This image

brings to mind associations with hospital recovery, but in the context of dozens of vodka bottles strewn around the flat, the “glucose” drip feed (as the song lyrics clarify) is also reminiscent of a detoxification centre (a staple of the uphill battle against alcoholism of the communist-era).

The eruption of familial violence could be linked to sisters’ uncanny sexuality. In an earlier scene, Krysia has a dream-like erotic fantasy while having sex with her husband – the drummer. She imagines herself as a sleek, dark-tailed mermaid mother with the two little mermaids suckling her breasts. Immediately on waking up from this half-dream she projects her own shameful desires onto her husband, angrily accusing him of smelling like a fish. The ridiculous exchange triggers several associations with the fishy smell: the mermaids and the spectre of their erotic irresistibility; the allegedly fish-like smell of female genitals, which would point to the drummer’s all-too-human infidelity; and, last but not least, the ubiquitous marinated herring, which ironically is also the husband’s official line of defence. This short scene is just one of many in which the two mermaids’ presence destabilizes the family’s (and the city’s) volatile organization of eroticism, desire, and sex. And yet, the mermaids might have disrupted more than just sexual desire; they also force the characters to confront the failed mimicry of their pseudo-successful, fake-Western existence in Adria, which they usually drown in alcohol.[\[xxxiii\]](#)

The mermaids may also stand for the brutality of the communist regime, which metaphorically rips people’s hearts (souls?) out, chews and spits them out. This becomes clear in the film noir subplot, where a female militia officer is hunting Golden. In one scene the whole family and the two mermaids are gathered watching television in one of the few images of domestic happiness. What starts as a comedic interlude – the drummer has requested a song for his wife (“Chronos” by Chase) on a listeners’ choice program and goes on to dance for her and even attempts a semi-serious striptease – quickly devolves into a tense quarrel. The drummer’s serenade is interrupted by a popular criminal chronicle, *Magazyn Kryminalny 997*, which recounts the grisly murder committed at the Vistula river and in which the female lieutenant, now dressed in her official MO uniform, implores viewers to come forward with any information pertaining to the crime. Interestingly, for 24 years the opening titles of *Magazyn Kryminalny 997* used the very same song that the drummer requested for his wife, which crafts an interesting intratextual link, reminding the audience how quickly meanings could be and were switched in the PRL – from a love song to criminal chronicle, from domestic bliss to domestic violence, from desire to fear of outsiders.

Conclusion

The manifold desires populating *The Lure* come in all materials and colours: on one hand, ardent reds and bright yellows, blonde wigs and white suits connect with the images of the affluent West, city nightlife and triumph; on the other, greenish blue, dark and fluorescent turquoise recall murky waters of the swimming pool, Adria's backstage, and the Vistula river. The latter hues are associated with the mermaids, as in their first solo number, which is more harsh punk than soft rock of Figs 'N' Dates. Singing their dark and violent song about "vicious love" and "black magic," they are wearing fauxhawks, copious amount of black kohl, and matching black sequin mini-dresses with scaly high shoulder pads reminiscent of New Wave futurism, while Adria's crazed audience is throwing money and red carnations at them. Though the patrons of Adria throwing banknotes triggers associations with the West and female performers in night clubs, red carnation is *the* quintessential communist flower - given to both men and women for official and nonofficial celebrations of all kinds. The marriage of West and East is fleeting, however, and the short-lived success quickly turns sour as Golden is rejected by her father and Silver fails to become a sexually available girl for Mietek.

The above-mentioned Adria scene encapsulates perfectly the relationship between stratified layers of social formations and the emerging BwO, to return to Deleuze and Guattari's nomenclature. The intensities released through the angry play of lights, sounds, words, pop-cultural associations, gestures, and movements speak to the two sisters' unbridled desires that struggle against the stratum represented by Adria, its patrons, and the musicians. The sisters come close to a total unraveling, a complete deterritorialization through the musical frenzy, but somehow manage to stay in control, within the stratum, and to explore all the possibilities it offers, potential lines of flight (punk rock, New Wave aesthetics, incestuous doubling of female desire, etc.), and new conjunctions of desiring machines that are formed against all expectations, logic even.

The embodied brain that emerges in the event of watching *The Lure* does not have to be bound by "the maudlin, even morbid, desire of psychoanalysis... doomed to dream forever of recovering the ideal object that is has lost" but rather may look forward to new interrelationships which have not yet been formed, which do not yet exist.[\[xxxiv\]](#) This orientation towards the future yet to come opens up new avenues of understanding, not necessarily based solely on reading and deciphering deep structures of cinematic language. Paradoxically, in this essay the orientation towards the future (rather than the past) stands for the communist past, which remains under-theorized, misplaced, and brushed aside, or, alternatively, squeezed into majoritarian narratives of Solidarity, wartime heroics, and *Komuna* (a derogative term for both communist regime and communist era). Instead of focusing on an

ahistorical conceptual framework of the monstrous feminine, I have opted to look at *The Lure* politically and socially, but through “le politique” of ordinary lives. In this I have joined the notion of an embodied brain with that of a situated brain, which combines freely the material-discursive singularities with affective states, and context- and time-specific references.^[xxxv] I hope to have shown that *The Lure’s* generic hybridity and its emphasis on the sensual rather than the cerebral and its highly synaesthetic form do not obscure or hinder a potential political analysis, but may, in fact, become the film’s main vehicle for social and political commentary.

[i] Agnieszka Smoczyńska, “*The Lure: An Introduction*,” *SeeThroughFlicks* Youtube channel, 1:57, 2 January, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vI2UHxMPk4I>

[ii] See, for instance, Justin Lowe for *The Hollywood Reporter*, David Ehrlick for *Indiewire.com*, Matt Goldberg for *Collider.com*, Simon Abrams for *RogerEbert.com*, Guy Lodge for *Variety*. Lodge’s final comment is the closest any of the reviewers get to the notion of the political: “Whether the 1980s period trappings are merely there for their own substantial kitsch value, or whether a degree of political subtext is present in these shenanigans, is among a number of questions left unanswered in the surf.”

[iii] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 268-269.

[iv] Anna Powell, “The Daemons of Unplumbed Space: Mixing the Planes in *Hellboy*,” in *Deleuze and Film*, ed. David Martin-Jones and William Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 174.

[v] Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 58.

[vi] It is worth noting here that these do not constitute three separate types, but rather point to certain forms of organization which at any given moment may gain ascendancy over the other two. See also “Introduction: Rhizome” in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia II: A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005 [c.1980]), 1-28.

[vii] Powell, “The Daemons,” 176.

[viii] *Ibid.*, 179.

[ix] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 185.

[x] Powell, "The Daemons," 185.

[xi] Barbara M. Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 182.

[xii] See, for instance, Rebecca Coleman, "Inventive Feminist Theory: Representation, Materiality and Intensive Time," *Women: A Cultural Review* 25, nb.1 (2014): 27-45.

[xiii] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 433.

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Another popular image associated with the mermaid is the Syrena, a Polish car manufactured between 1957 and 1972; a widely popular, if perennially faulty automobile became one of the symbols of the fall of communism, when in the early 1990s thousands of Syrenkas (as Poles lovingly called them) were abandoned and even set on fire. See also, Olga Drenda, *Duchologia polska: rzeczy i ludzie w latach transformacji* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Karakter, 2016), 39.

[xvi] Though both siren and mermaid are translated into "syrena" in Polish, the two creatures are not necessarily synonymous. The siren is a wider category which includes half-woman and half-bird or half-dragon creatures, not necessarily only half-woman and half-fish. See also museum's website: <http://artmuseum.pl/en/wystawy/syrena-herbem-twym-zwodnicza>

[xvii] Maria Janion, *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna: fantazmaty literatury*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006.

[xviii] Elżbieta Ostrowska, "Desiring the Other: The Ambivalent Polish Self in Novel and Film." *Slavic Review* 70, nb. 3 (September 2011): 503.

[xix] The name comes from the seminal work of the most famous Polish romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz - *Dziady, Part III* (1832).

[xx] Yet another surprising connection to Polish Romanticism comes in the form of Ballady i Romanse, sister music duo who composed the soundtrack for *The Lure* and who appear briefly as wedding singers in the last part of the movie. *Ballady i Romanse (Ballads and Romances)* is the title of Mickiewicz's collection of romantic ballads, which features a number of Slavic supernatural elements and is sometimes cited as Polish Romanticism manifesto. The name of the band, however, comes from a communist era poet (Władysław Broniewski) who took Mickiewicz's work and remade it after his own fashion to offer a merciless retelling of the

original ballad, this time set during the World War II and concerning little Jewish girl's execution by the SS.

[xxi] The book was met with both lavish applause and sharp criticism. Jan Sowa, in his review for *Le Monde Diplomatique Polska* rightly points out a confusion of terms employed by Leder: his concepts of "middle-class", "bourgeoisie", and "urbanites" are ill-defined, which weakens his overall thesis. See also Jan Sowa, Review of *Prześlona rewolucja: ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* by Andrzej Leder, *Le Monde Diplomatique Polska* 06/100 (June 2014), http://monde-diplomatique.pl/LMD100/index.php?id=1_5

[xxii] Adria's boss, "Pan Kierownik" (Mr. Manager - a popular appellation used during communist era to refer to men managing all kinds of public spaces, offices, institutions, etc.) tells the singer to get some human clothes for the two naked mermaids. In Polish language his order has a two-fold implication: the two sisters not only lack proper human attire but they also do not look proper, that is just like young urban girls should.

[xxiii] Polska Republika Ludowa (PRL), or The Polish People's Republic, covers the period between 1952 and 1990. Following a brief period of economic stability and relative prosperity of the 1970s, the 1980s saw a gradual collapse of the communist regime. Today, the 1980s are still remembered mostly via images of empty shop shelves, martial law (1981-1983), the rise of Solidarity movement, and a slow embrace of Western goods, lifestyles, and culture.

[xxiv] See also Magda Szcześniak, *Normy widzialności: tożsamość w czasach transformacji*. Warszawa: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana: Instytut Kultury Polskiej. Wydział Polonistyki. Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2016.

[xxv] Agata Pyzik, *Poor but Sexy: Culture Clashes in Europe East and West* (Zero Books: 2014),

136.

[xxvi] Ibid.

[xxvii] Pyzik, *Poor but Sexy*, 7.

[xxviii] Dominik Bartmanski, "Successful Icons of Failed Time: Rethinking Post-communist Nostalgia," *Acta Sociologica* 54, nb. 3 (2011): 227.

[xxix] Patricia Pisters, "Delirium Cinema or Machines of the Invisible?" in *Deleuze and the*

Schizoanalysis of Cinema, ed. Ian Buchanan and Patricia MacCormack (London: Continuum, 2008), 114.

[xxx] I have purposefully avoided discussing Polish horror cinema, which arguably consists of a handful of titles that could be roughly divided into two categories: high-brow psychological dramas and low-brow campy productions of the 1980s. And it is still too early to say if Smoczyńska's *The Lure* and Marcin Wrona's *Demon* (2015) might signal a new wave of horror cinema in Poland.

[xxxii] Pyzik, *Poor but Sexy*, 58.

[xxxiii] Pyzik addresses three typical explanations: historical serfdom, communist regime, and neoliberal shock therapy that left people deeply scarred.

[xxxiiii] For more on the concept of mimicry applied in postcolonial studies see also Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* 28 (Spring, 1984): 125-133.

[xxxv] Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivities, Theories of the Self, From Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 142-143

[xxxvi] I would like to thank Anna Kurowicka for the concept of a "situated brain."

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