

The current between us

Supposedly, technology is the magic of our era in the way poetry once was. One could even say that technology has become magic as poetry ceased to be. But what do I actually mean by magic here? A person with magical abilities reigns over a certain energy and — with its help — is able to alter reality, often against the laws of nature. We do not know how they are able to do this; the source of their power remains secret. Obviously then, technology just imitates magic — its origins, rules, and workings are publicly available and anyone who understands its language and obtains the tools can reproduce them. The problem is that because this knowledge is so cutting-edge and human experience of modern technologies is so rapid, that to us, it just seems to be magic. Technology is magic for our skin and eyes, for our senses and experiences. Today, we could ask whether poetry did really have any greater supernatural powers? What was this power, exactly? Perhaps people once really believed in its divine origins, the enchanting abilities and arcane links with fairy tales. In her work, Agnieszka Polska preserves the memory of poetry's properties and restores its magical potential exactly via technological means. At the same time, reaching for the poetic, the artist deconstructs modern instrumental rationalism, leading the viewer towards not so much enchantment, but a different, and more complex and accessible wisdom.

Today we are often reluctant to talk about magic, but we do say that art is affective. If it was once possible to truly interfere with reality, the order of matter, or someone's thoughts and feelings through magic, then art should cause shivers, series of impressions, and emotional stimulation — after all, such bodily experiences are the key to a change in perception. Art is about triggering small earthquakes, excitement, trembling or shaking, so that the influence of an artwork remains unforgettable and leads to a change in the life of its viewer. Of course, in modernity, this kind of artistic interference in viewers' experience has not always been desirable; it did not always determine the value of an artwork. I do not wish to examine the artists and critics' attitudes towards this dimension of the aesthetic experience, but it is worth remembering that playing with emotions can also enable manipulation and strip the viewer of their freedom. In this

sense, art that is distanced and intended for intellectual contemplation, allows the viewer greater autonomy, freedom, and space for reflection. The ideal, of course, is a work so sensual that it is touching, and yet complex enough to leave an uncertain impression, arousing a desire to solve its mystery and further explore the world. I find this duality in poetry and art that is inspired by its forgotten power and is thus able to endow a given figure with sensuality and stimulate a metaphor to life.

What else is this poetic power? Why do the protagonists of *One Thousand-Year Plan* talk about electrification in poetic verse, electrical current flows through hearts, and a bird trembles because of the signal? What is this energy that flows through the poem and the wire to turn night into day? In the past, poetry's astonishing energy resulted from the gift of prophesizing in the Judeo-Christian tradition or the visitation by *daimonion* in the Greek tradition. One of the most important myths regarding poetry is, after all, that by playing the lyre, Orpheus was able to calm animals and move rocks. This means that there exists a language, a kind of tremble in the air that can release unknown possibilities: the realm of "I", which we felt, but did not know about; new or unwelcome feelings; experiences beyond our control and other impossible phenomena. This difficulty in controlling the affective influence of poetry is the reason poets were expelled from the Plato's republic. Affects were not conducive to levelheaded politics — but this later changed in romanticism, with the recognition of the importance of human feelings that expresses what was good in nature.

At that point, poets obtained special privileges. Thanks to their affective mood, they became keepers of creative power — they were able to fully experience reality and expressed those sensations in their work. As such, their actions were judged based on a particularly profound experience of reality that was unavailable to others. In romanticism, the importance of feelings not only enhanced particularism but also supported the visions of universal human nature. Anyone with a heart can be a part of a society and even participate in democracy. The poet can preside over this community, just as he mediates between nature, God, and the people, through their poetry. The language they speak should not be idiomatic but rather transparent, in order to touch every heart. This is how

the myth of romantic and yet simultaneously public poet is born — a bard. This is how one could briefly outline the political variant of the poet's affective abilities, bearing in mind that in romanticism one would find many more.

This myth could be called the romantic utopia of communication and community. However, it is quite easy to find certain ambivalence within it: this community of language and feeling is made possible by poetry, the language of signs. For some poets, a belief in their own political power meant speaking in an understandable, clear manner — a language accessible to everyone. For others, romantic nature did not manifest directly, but via signs and hieroglyphics, various ciphers accessed via the truth of one's heart — passions, inspirations, dreams, intuitions, and revelations. Access to reality led through the heart of the poet, who conveyed its meaning in the language of symbols. In *Gorączka romantyczna* [Romantic Fever], professor Maria Janion noted that direct influence, a simple persuasion leading to the integration of the nation under the slogans of nationalist identity, or the so-called terrorism of Polish affectiveness, is the dubious accomplishment of the romantic bards. In romanticism, according to Janion, it was more important to “renew the very principle of symbolic culture [...] In this way, romanticism conveyed to realism its most important feature: the prevailing belief that reality contains “deeper meanings” and that they must be reached by means of hermeneutics: by revealing that, which is hidden.”

Janion stresses that this text manifested itself in the presence of reflected images and sounds, echoes and shadows, and nature has as much from the natural world as from literature — precisely because of its secret, tropic nature. The modernist crisis of representation is the unquestionable turning point for the faith in the reciprocity of the poetic soul and language of nature. Baudelaire's “Sounds” will prove to be the most significant expression of the fulfilment and end of this myth, in which the language of nature and creative expression are interdependent and inseparable. For Baudelaire, this leads to the worship of art:

Correspondences

Nature is a temple where living pillars
Let sometimes emerge confused words;
Man crosses it through forests of symbols
Which watch him with intimate eyes.

Like those deep echoes that meet from afar
In a dark and profound harmony,
As vast as night and clarity,
So perfumes, colors, tones answer each other.

There are perfumes fresh as children's flesh,
Soft as oboes, green as meadows,
And others, corrupted, rich, triumphant,

Possessing the diffusion of infinite things,
Like amber, musk, incense and aromatic resin,
Chanting the ecstasies of spirit and senses.

— trans. Geoffrey Wagner, *Selected Poems of Charles Baudelaire* (NY: Grove Press, 1974)

This metaphysical reciprocity of the language of nature and the language of poetry finally shattered at the beginning of the 20th century when art and poetry lost their supernatural power, the language of symbols turned out to be the arbitrary language of signs, energy could no longer flow through them in an innocent, obvious way. But this does not mean that all potentials of meaning and impact were lost. Now, it all depended on the power of an individual voice, the manner of an individual body and the will of the recipient, who could — if they wished — open up, but could also refuse (if they were already released from poetry's magic spell) — just like they could leave a community that was just an imagined one. At the same time, other technologies of communication began to emerge: telegraph, telephone and radio were invented, and with them human communication became widely accessible regardless of the distance separating individuals.

A new miracle has thus occurred. Walt Whitman captured this shift in magical ground by announcing: "I sing the body electric," even if his exhilaration at a democratic, egalitarian crowd developed straight from the aforementioned romantic heritage. Whitman's electrifying affect that binds strangers was also a manifestation of faith in the possibility of universal communication between free individuals, a community based on individual poetic enthusiasm and technologies that transform social life. Therefore, the basis of the community cannot no longer be a metaphysical myth, but the exaltation of poetic voice and imagination stimulated by technology. Now, electricity becomes the condition of possibility for communication, the basis of mutual relationships and the energy stemming from the flow of language. The bard is replaced by electrical elements that form an egalitarian network for communication.

The romantic myth of poetry, however, faced a crisis with the advent of total modernity, and was almost completely lost as a result of WWII. The trauma of war equalled the trauma of the entirety of culture — the magic of poetry has been subjected to harsh criticism, and the question of the very possibility of ethical discourse has come to the fore. Increasingly, with the decline of the myth of art, the only thing bringing hope for understanding and community will be faith in new technologies. Today, this faith in technology is also in crisis, and this crisis is the starting point for Polska's film, even if it is set right after WWII, during the transition between the myths of poetry and technology.

Through an unexpected connection Polska layers these two myths in order to give them, for a moment, a common life. Thus, she asks about the potentials of a community, including our contemporary community. On two screens, we see short excerpts from the life of two pairs of protagonists: engineers working on the electrification of a village and accursed soldiers. They are located right next to each other, but they cannot meet, because of their contrary attitudes. This is Poland in the late 1940s and 1950s: engineers are implementing the millennial plan, modernizing the country while simultaneously serving the people and the notorious state power; meanwhile, the cast out soldiers reject the new statehood, fight for their dream country and a pure, homogenous community, even

if they are to put ordinary citizens at risk. The artist introduces poetry into this difficult political reality, a moment right after the disaster and just before the new dawn. While we observe the parallel images of prosaic scenes from opposing ideologies, there are times when the characters say the same thing simultaneously, or a separate, shared voice sings their lines for them. The first song by Jasiiek and Wiktoria is the promise of a day that “will never end”.

“Uncertainty is hope /
That I’ll no longer be afraid

This hope is associated as much with the image of wires as with shivering at the thought of another person’s proximity:

“Your name is a signal
That makes my body tremble
I don’t know its meaning
Uncertainty is hope”

The second song, sung entirely by Voice of the Sparkle is a utopian vision of a new world in which the current will unite everyone and everything, just like nature and art in Baudelaire’s “Sounds”:

Electricity is the medium of your thoughts
Electricity measures a new time
Your words are a spell
That can change its course
[...]

In cables, wires, lines, and networks

In seas and rivers, the current flows

In dreams and wakefulness, the current flows

Through birds and earth and air

Electricity is there in my sister, brother, mother, and daughter

Through sister, brother, mother, daughter, the current flows

In your thoughts, the current flows

Electricity, the medium of your thoughts

The electrical current measures the new time

Your words are a spell

They can change its course

The horizon brightens

I can finally see your face

We don't have to wait for dawn

The night has turned into day

Polska's protagonists also have a common dream: "A bird sits on a telegraph wire, through which the most important information flows. The bird cannot understand the information flowing through the wire, but its body trembles under the influence of the signal. Then night turns into day and I wake up.." And they also have a single prophetic vision: "Now, when I look into the future, I see only a bright light that burns my eyes – like an explosion, a luminous cloud, a void. I need to look away..." These statements are captured by the off-screen Voice of the Sparkle and its status will be conclusive in determining the artist's point of view. However, it might as well be said right away that this status is indeed

inconclusive and the common voice is rather a plane for asking questions, speculations and imaginings. This common voice can only exist thanks to art – but this doesn't mean it cannot exist in reality. We see people who are only able to meet within a work of art, on two interconnected screens, together and yet separate. Their identity emerges just for a moment – within a dream, a song, or a revelation. These romantic means of expression have a double meaning: they can be understood as an expression of personal desires or expression of obliviousness. Usually these would be seen as individual, personal experiences whereas here it's the opposite: these states provide the only meeting point. This situation raises a number of questions. Perhaps despite our political differences we are, at heart, all the same? Perhaps if we started to share our hopes and fears and laid bare our unconscious, we would be able to communicate? Perhaps all we all really want is just a safe life, a never-ending day? All this may be true, but this is not the limit of possibilities.

In the dream, the bird cannot understand the information flowing through the wire, but the current makes its body tremble. And yet, it seems that it is not about the bird at all. After all, Polska's protagonists wish that it is their bodies would tremble, that the whole reality would tremble – that everyone and everything would feel the same, the same life, the same feeling. After all, the bird does not know anything about the information transmitted through the wire. In singing, dreaming and visions, the utopia of mutual connection returns, but in order for it to be fully realized, the differences between language and ideas must be blurred. At the level of basic affects, worldviews are irrelevant and nothing has to stand between people anymore. And yet, the song includes the phrase

With the current flows the power

The signal arrives from the exchange

And even though it burns the bodies

That stand in its way

Your words are a spell

That can change its course

Perhaps electrification is just a prerequisite – perhaps once connected to the grid, someone somewhere can deliberately and consciously influence the flow of the current? Words are meant to act like a spell, so again, we return to magic – or, in the contemporary sense, the conscious use of energies cast in words.

But we will not find answers here. The artist leaves us entwined in the archives of reality and fantasy, in order to force us to rethink our contemporary condition. This state of not knowing, following an intense experience of an ethereal encounter of two myths, can be the most creative state. This kind of not knowing emerging immediately after realizing our own unawareness and desires, and which would be the starting point for speaking for ourselves, speaking consciously and actively, speaking that would allow everyone to participate in the network of exchange – of affect, but also thought. However, this is not a typical step towards enlightened maturity. Here, Polska introduces a significant modification: a fairytale, poetic foundation appears requisite for us to be able to trust in the possibilities of connection. Poetry and technology will not turn us into a genuine community, but together they create the space and time continuum for the faint hope thanks to which we are able to meet in reality.

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