**The secret stolen from lightning. Magical socialist realism in Agnieszka Polska's work**

Look at this antenna of television as it is. It is rigid but it is oriented; we see that it looks into the distance, and that it can receive [signals] from an emitter far away. For me, it appears to be more than a symbol; it seems to represent a gesture of sorts, an almost magical power of intentionality, a contemporary form of magic.
Gilbert Simondon[1]

Electricity, that was how to economize on universal matter and guard it from mindless pilferage, to save it from being reduced to mortal dust and the cold of space.
Andrei Platonov[2]

In 1882, a manager at an American telecommunications company observed an unusual acoustic phenomenon. He reported hearing "the croaking of frogs and the singing of birds [on a wire that] passes through dense wood and along large streams."[3] He thought the sound might have been induced into the electromagnetic field of the wire as a result of the conductive properties lent by the surrounding "damp atmosphere."[4] Douglas Kahn, the author of *Earth, Sound, Signal*, who recounts this anecdote, references a number of interpretations of 19th-century scientists who tried to understand how natural audiosphere infiltrates the infrastructure of the new telecommunications technology. Typically, scientists would explain this phenomenon by worn-out cable ends or tangled telephone lines, which, because of their porosity, would act as receivers and transmitters

[1] Gilbert Simondon, *Entretien sur la mécanologie*, „Revue de synthèse" 2009, 130(1), pp.103–132, quoted in Yuk Hui, *On Cosmotechnics: For a Renewed Relationship between Technology and Nature in Antropocene*, "Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology" 2017, No. 21 (2-3), p. 333

[2] Andrei Platonov *A Technical Novel: Bread and reading*, ca 1926. Published in English in *Index on Censorship,* Vol 20, Issue 8, 1991, p. 47. Translated by Geoffrey Smith

[3] Douglas Kahn, *Earth Sound Earth Signal: Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts*, Berkeley 2013, University of California Press. Kindle Edition, p. 9

[4] Op cit.

of the surrounding outside world. According to Kahn, experiencing the symbiosis of technology and nature in this way was caused by a particular understanding of electricity and new media — especially since the emergence of the first grid, when telephone lines, telegraph wires, and underwater cables began interacting with Earth's natural electromagnetic field. As Kahn writes, human perception is capable of hearing and interpreting the sounds of nature: "[…] nature sounds are familiar while nature *signals* are not: birds sing, but most people have not heard the magnetosphere whistle."[5]

For a moment, let us briefly take the perspective of a bird sitting on a wire instead of that of a person in front of a telephone set. Let us set aside the curiosity of anthropocentric reason and consider instead how the wire transmits the birdsong and what can the bird sat on the wire hear. I am asking this question in order to refer to the dream recounted by a protagonist of Agnieszka Polska's film entitled *The Thousand-Year Plan*. An unusual encounter of four people roaming the fields, wetlands, and forests in south-eastern Poland unfolds across two screens of a film installation. They are a couple of engineers working to connect rural areas to the electromagnetic grid in the early 1950s and two anti-communist guerrillas hiding out in the nearby forests.[6] Wiktoria, an engineer working to connect the village of Stasiny to the grid, recalls a dream about a bird sat on a telegraph wire that transmitted "the most vital information." According to her, the bird cannot understand the content of this transmission, but its entire body trembles because of the signal. "Then the night turns into day and I wake up," Wiktoria concludes.

The dualistic vision of a world divided into nature and technology has accustomed us to the narrative of modern advancement and the standardization of life leading to the disappearance of symbols, rituals, and the sphere of the sacred. The philosopher Bruno

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[5] Ibidem, p.7

[6] Following WWII, the partisan struggle continued to affect everyday life in eastern and south-eastern Poland. These partisan units were strongly anti-Soviet and anti-communist. The number of people involved in armed resistance against the Soviet and communist authorities at any given moment of the early post-war period is not thought to have exceeded 20,000, and it decreased to around 2,000 after the 1947 amnesty. Many rogue partisan groups committed crimes against civilians, especially against various ethnic minorities such as Jews, Ukrainians and other Slavic groups.

Latour calls this way of thinking the "Great Divide" into modernity and pre-modernity. He points out however, that we have never been modern and that human and non-human belong to orders that have always coexisted in a hybrid entanglement.[7] In this essay, I explore how Agnieszka Polska's *The Thousand-Year Plan* reveals the process of experiencing technological transformation and destabilizes the separations into nature and technology, rational modernization and the spiritual sphere. What does it mean to tremble under the influence of great change but be unable to express it in words? What space does human language — alongside non-human factors not only those representing the world of plants, animals, fossils, but also the camera eye, abstract sound composition or digital animation inscription — occupy in this process? Beyond "the magnetosphere whistle," what voice is technology addressing us with?

**Electrical presence**

Electricity and accompanying inventions such as the magnetic telegraph, daguerreotype, and radio are technologies of immediate, disembodied presence. When the night turned into day, as a result of the mutual attraction between the world of science and esotericism and metaphysics, between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 20th century, a new order emerged. It interpreted the body, nervous system, and consciousness in dialogue with technology and information systems. Metaphorically and quite literally, a "damp atmosphere" accompanied this romance. While the founder of the concept of magnetism and mesmerism, Franz Anton Mesmer, attempted to restore the balance of vital fluids in patients by moving magnets over their bodies, during spectacular electricity shows, 18th-century scientists would light liquid in a metal cup with a spark from their finger, and physician Anthony Carlisle together with engineer William Nicholson, using a small galvanic battery, would decompose the water into its component parts. A century later, when the wet collodion technique was developed, the photographic image would sharpen in mercury vapour. Physical mediums spurted ectoplasm, an ethereal substance, thanks to which spirits could materialize through their bodies (at least according to them).

[7] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* Cambridge 1991, Harvard University Press

Liquids, electricity, and spirits have often been the subject of scientific and pseudo-scientific explorations. One example of such investigation would be interventions carried out by the Polish medium and inventor Julian Ochorowicz, who, during a spiritualist session with the Neapolitan medium Eusapia Palladino, measured the electrical resistance of her body with a galvanometer.[8]

Contemporary humanities literature widely describes the fascination and close relationship between science, occultism, hypnosis and supernatural phenomena. Jeffrey Sconce, the author of *Haunted Media. Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, claims that electricity was considered the quantum physics of the 19th century.[9] He writes that at the time, as a field at the intersection of science and spirituality, it [electricity] posed more questions than it could answer. However, it constituted a projection screen for cultural fantasies related to disembodied technology controlling the invisible to the eye forces that disrupted the boundaries of time and space. The experience of this change laid the foundation for our contemporary fears, fascinations, and other affective reactions related to digital technologies, such as cyberspace or virtual reality. Sconce argues, that as industrialization progressed in the 19th century, confidence in the machine began to give way to faith in electricity[10], which promised a superhuman driving force — a "secret stolen from lightning", to use a metaphor from the Polish electricians' anthem. Let us look at the 1928 brochure published by the Polish Power Plant Association entitled *Elektryczność w pokoju jadalnym* [Electricity in the Dining Room], advertising the new electric "labour force" to modern bourgeoisie:

> We connected our flat with, one could say, the universe from which we draw a subtle, immaterial extract. We turn it into our most obedient and miraculously gifted servant. A servant who, when called out, does what he should and disappears without leaving any unpleasant traces of his presence.[11]

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[8] For example, in 1877 Ochorowicz elaborated the theory for a monochromatic television, to be constructed as a screen comprising bulbs that would convert transmitted images into groups of light points.

[9] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television,* Duke University Press, Durham & London 2000, p. 35

[10] Op. cit p. 36

[11] *Elektryczność w Pokoju Jadalnym*. [Electricity in the Dining Room], Wydawnictwo Związku Elektrowni Polskich, Warszawa 1928, p. 2

The motif of electric sublimation, based on depicting technology as a mystical driving force with almost superhuman properties, runs through various texts published at the turn the 20th century. They range from the advertising column quoted above, through literary examples in Walter Benjamin, who wrote about city lights, comparing it to "the golden globe of life", or Andrei Platonov, who called electricity a "revolution converted from hope to matter". What is striking in the quoted fragment is the anthropomorphisation of electricity. Even though it is transcendental and "miraculous", it is also submissive and harnessed in order to provide a certain user experience in a silent and invisible manner, just like its entire infrastructure. As the historian of art and architecture Sandy Isenstadt points out, the gesture of turning on the light with an electric switch was as miraculous as it was intimate and efficient: "At the glance, the switch seems to contradict the device paradigm since it refocused attention on the mechanisms of the electrical delivery system. But in experiential terms the switch suggested the ease with which vast amounts of labor, incalculable stores of energy, and sprawling networks could be snapped into service at a moment's notice."[12]

The interaction between the user and the electricity supply was therefore something of an everyday magic, a media performance for the private sphere (i.e., the home) that went a long way from public illusionist shows and semi-private séances in spiritualist salons to finally stepping into private living space and making a home there, for good. Today, when technology design is closely linked with creating an intimate relationship between the user and the interface (*personal* computers, *i*Phone, *individual* recommendations suggested by algorithms, chatbots *imitating humans*) it is hard to imagine a more common experience than immediately illuminating the darkness of a bedroom with a stream of light. Harnessing the deadly force, previously known only as lightning bolts, and managing it by flicking a switch or touching a button, must have been a source of consumer/user satisfaction and agency. But before this divine haptic technology became part of everyday experience, electricity — like any new technology — aroused an equal amount of fear and delight.

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[12]Sandy Isenstadt, *Electric Light. An Architectural History,* The MIT Press, Cambridge 2018, p. 60.

**From electrical sublimation to a trembling infrastructure**

When writing about electric sublimation, I would like to move away from magical thinking about technology and focus on the experience of the technological turn as an ontological shock, an event that causes a cognitive and existential crisis of human consciousness. Such an event — which Benjamin Bratton terms as the Copernican turn[13] — can shake the faith in the individual's agency, demonstrating the existence of something bigger and stronger than us — something that shows us that humans, despite our fantasies about taming nature and technology, are by no means the centre of planetary structures. The historical background of Agnieszka Polska's work is the turning point in the history of the belated modernization of the Polish countryside, i.e., connecting rural areas to the electromagnetic grid in the early 1950s and the grassroots mobilization of social groups joining the electrical revolution. Following WWII, there were about 1830 electrified villages in the pre-war Polish lands and 1680 in the Recovered Territories. This constituted about nine per cent of all villages in Poland and about two per cent of all farms. With the three-year plan, the electrification of rural areas began, but it was the Act on the general electrification of villages and estates, passed by the Parliament on 28 June 1950, that ensured the rapid and equal development of the grid. The first years right after the war were also a time when representatives of the anti-communist underground were hiding out in villages and forests of eastern and central Poland, awaiting the next armed uprising. This period preceding the widespread electrification of rural areas provides the backdrop for Agnieszka Polska's *The Thousand-Year Plan* film. In her film, the framework of electrical-technological infrastructure is based, on the one hand, on the engineers' tales of a recently installed current converter, and on the other, guerrillas' equipment just visible on screen — matches and a radio.

The radio receiver's transmission of St Mary's Trumpet Call (broadcast everyday at noon on Polish Radio Channel One) is a shared media experience that connects protagonists on both screens, just like the electrification process shown through their eyes as a

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[13] See: Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Terraforming,* Strelka Press, Moscow 2019.

strongly affective experience. The future looms as a bright, blinding light "like an explosion, a lucent cloud, a void" from which one must look away. In the face of the impending breakthrough, personal fears and hopes of both the energy workers (for whom socialism provided education and enabled social promotion) and the partisans (who oppose the new state system) are revealed, come to light. Although the engineers talk about the material infrastructure of this event — they discuss the length of the wire and the location of the nearest current converter, their exchanges focuses primarily on dreams, fantasies, and intuitions about what will happen when "when the Sun sets still in the sky, the new dawn will never fade". The pair imagine their future life in an advanced megastructure, "among the cables, telegraphs, fibre-optics, soybean crops, electrical waste, and rivers infused with information and antibiotics". Even though they are fictional, we can speculate that these characters are familiar with the understanding of the medium proposed by one of the most important contemporary philosophers of infrastructure, urban planning and technology, Keller Easterling. Writing about medium thinking, she doesn't limit herself to telecommunications media, but defines the medium as the surrounding air, water and earth environment, in which various spatial relations take place. According to Easterling, space is an information system, a chamber where political, social and technological networks mix with one another. "Space does not need the screens and sensors of the internet of things to make its stiff arrangements dance. It is already dancing."[14]

The experience of a vibrating, "dancing" planetary megastructure is also present in Agnieszka Polska's film. Infrastructure isn't just masts, wires, objects of a specific weight and dimensions, but the potential for dependences and relationships between them. Its "trembling" in post-war Poland also consisted in reversing the traditional division into top-down and bottom-up modernization within an apparently systematic grid of rationalist order, inventory, taxonomy and planning; a division into those who bring the light and those who meekly receive electrification. Because of the balance of geopolitical forces, the electrical revolution in rural areas was greatly delayed and the construction of the grid

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[14]Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World,* Moscow 2018, Strelka Press, Kindle edition, p. 4

very often eluded top-down plans. Jacek Szyke, one of the forefathers of the energy sector who worked on electrification of Poland in the 1950s, recalls that people in rural areas showed great interest in electrification, joined in the process of their own accord and made great efforts, both in terms of finances and organization, to procure energy.[15] They organized themselves into electrification committees, attended electrician training, carried out heavy installation work (transporting and erecting wooden poles, digging earthings), and even hacked modernization with their own system of folk rituals and practices. Although electrification ceremonies in the villages began with Lenin's words "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country", further ceremonials and celebrations were carried out in a way more typical of local customs and often went beyond the directives of the central authorities. For example, additional lighting points were installed, and difficult to acquire meters and spare parts were supplied. Thus, the farmers were rightful subjects of the electrification process and co-created the face of the Polish countryside and modernization. Historian Kate Brown, writing about the communist unification of the Eastern Borderlands (the so-called Kresy) – the periphery that was economically and socially marginalized both for most of Polish history – draws attention to the tension between top-down modernization and the stereotypically observed backwardness of the Borderlands located near the areas where the action of Agnieszka Polska's film takes place:

> Although in their charts Soviet officials listed many items that no one has ever laid eyes on—such as borders, ethnicity, class, and political mood—they failed to count in their unending tabulations another more vital invisible category, an ephemeral echelon of existence inhabiting the *kresy* that consisted of wood nymphs, holy apparitions, miraculous wells, healing icons, as well as the house demon and the evil eye. Soviet officials failed to count this other world not because they were materialists and the "other world" was immaterial, but because they possessed no means by which to envision and quantify the very substantial effect of the spiritual realm on the lives of borderland inhabitants.[16]

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[15]Jacek Szyke, *O energetyce z sentymentem* [On energetics with sentiment], Warszawa 2009, JES Energy, p. 188.

[16]Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*, pp 53-54, Harvard University Press, 2009

The breakdown of symbols and the existing world order is an entropic experience, but in the chronicles of the electrification of Polish borderlands we can read about various adaptation strategies, for example specific electrification rituals practiced in rural areas, which eluded the rigid division between the spiritual and the technological. The symbolic breaking of an kerosene lamp against a transformer, sprinkling holy water on the new electrical infrastructure or dancing parties and feasts organised to celebrate the electrification of villages put together by peasants' committees strengthened the small rural communities. Thanks to their grassroots pressure, the processes of electrification were faster and more efficient, and the "rites of passage" lent the event a festive character. Perhaps the cognitive gap in understanding the rules and principles of rural life was an important strategy of resistance, a glitch[17] in the modernization process, thus becoming a constituent of cultural and economic independence and survival. In Agnieszka Polska's film, this glitch emerges when the map prepared by the Central Electrification Board leads the engineers along the shortest route to the swamps. The marsh in which cow drowned is the literal and empirical boundary of central management; rural engineers take the initiative and carry out the process of electrification of their ancestral land in their own way.

**Towards cosmotechnics**

Can the past live alongside the future? Can electrification coexists with the belief in a luminous higher power that throws thunder and fertilizes the soil, where children's souls appear in the form of St. Elmo's fires, and the ravines hide belemnites[18] and Devil's fingers? The philosopher Yuh Hui argues that thanks to new types of media and new

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[17] Legacy Russel writes about the creative and emancipatory potentials of the glitch in the context of contemporary digital technology and body politics, see: Legacy Russel, *Glitch Feminism*, Verso, London 2020.

[18] Before belemnites were identified as fossils, it was believed that they appeared wherever lighting has struck the stone. They can be found in ravines near Lublin. In south-eastern territories it was also believed that St. Elmo's fires and fireballs are embodiments of dead children's souls.

methods of digital encryption, previously displaced symbols and rituals can re-inhabit our collective memory. Hui encourages us to view technology as a new kind of philosophy, a recursive practice through which we can return to ourselves, in order to transcend ourselves, in order to depart from a linear understanding of progress, divisions between modern and traditional, natural and artificial.[19] For Hui, cosmotechnics is the fusion of the cosmological and moral order with technological activities. Meanwhile, human activities accompanied by technical objects and tools from time immemorial, are always – in a sense – cosmotechnical; in addition to their functionality, they carry an affective and aesthetic potential.[20] Agnieszka Polska's work deliberately integrates the spiritual and metaphysical spheres with nature and the process of technologization of life. Who or what are the animated flickers appearing in the most unexpected places and the sparks of energy crossing the "the fragile interface of [the] face[s]" of her protagonists?[21] It's hard to tell whether the artist "animates", that is revives technology with the help of a suggestive soundtrack and digital animation thus providing it with agency and sentience, or – on the contrary – "electrifies" the forces of nature and the surrounding landscape. Perhaps these binaries, counterparts and antagonisms are secondary and no longer relevant. Both spheres are "already dancing."

**Natalia Sielewicz**

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[19]See Yuk Hui, https://monoskop.org/Yuk_Hui [accessed: 19 May 2021] and Yuk Hui, *On a Possible Passing from the Digital to the Symbolic*, in: *2 or 3 Tigers*, Berlin, Haus der Kulturen den Welt, ed. Anselm Franke, Hyunjin Kim:

https://www.hkw.de/media/texte/pdf/2017_2/2o3tiger/170530_2o3Tiger_PDFs_Yuk_Hui_press_new.pdf [accessed: 19 May 2021]

[20]Ibidem

[21] At one point in the film, a stream of light shines on the faces of the protagonists, resembling a spark causing an electrical short. "The fragile interface of the face" is also a phrase that appears in the Sun's poetic monologue in Agnieszka Polska's 2017 video work, *The New Sun*.