Intermediality of the digital video image as détrompe l'oeil in three contemporary Polish fiction films

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This article examines how the digital video image is integrated in three contemporary Polish films (“Wesele”, “Egoisci” and “Sala samobójców”), creating an effect of unveilment which is analyzed through notions of intermediality and trompe l’oeil. Traditional narrative cinema consistently proposes forms of realism, and digital technologies in film tend to further this endeavour, although they are not restricted to special effects or animation. The three films chosen for this analysis use various semi- or non-professional cameras not as a trompe l’oeil but rather as a détrompe l’oeil which contributes to the critical stance these works offer regarding the social reality represented. The subject and treatment of these films are linked to a socio-economic and political situation marked by the transition from communism to capitalism.

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Integration of the digital video (DV) camera and of the image it produces in fiction films can act as a device of unveilment and contribute to the critical stance that these works offer regarding the social reality represented or referenced. Although this article’s first aim is to investigate a theoretical avenue regarding the use of digital media in fiction, three Polish films will serve to demonstrate the implications of such an aesthetic: Wesele (The Wedding Banquet, 2004), Egości (The Egoists, 2000) and Sala samobójców (Suicide Room, 2011), in which the themes and aesthetics are linked to a socio-economic and political situation marked by the transition from communism to capitalism. Bearing in mind P. Ricoeur’s observations on fiction and ethics (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 139, p. 167), we are inclined to consider these films as some kind of moral and aesthetic laboratories in which the images, alternating between a master film track and shots produced by a DV camera, invite the viewer to consider both the use of digital technologies in a minor1 cinematography and the difficulties of adapting a communist society to a capitalist regime. The intermedial device set up by the films include a mise en abyme of the cinema screen, which is expanded in various types of screens or images

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of screens. This intermediality will sometimes intertwine some characters’ intimate testimonies into the storyline, or will help to reveal what they cannot see or refuse to see (individually or collectively). By enabling a greater proximity to the characters and by adding a deterritorializing (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) point of view to the illusionist mode of representation common to fiction films in general, which I will here associate with _trompe l’oeil_ (the misleading of the eye), this digital device operates as a _dé trompe l’oeil_. It also infringes upon the Hollywood utilization of digital technology which favors the production of special effects set in the traditional realist trajectory, functioning in a closed circuit. The introductory notion of deterritorialization seems all the more significant for the following investigation because of the economic position maintained between Hollywood cinema and minor national cinemas. Polish cinema certainly qualifies as a minor national cinema given its somewhat fragile industrial bases: the film industry was state-owned, operated and regulated (sometimes censored) until 1989, and, following the initial confusion of post-communist society, only in 2005 did the government invest in a significant support structure for film production (the Polish Film Institute), which had until then been left under the guidance of the new and hesitant free-market economy. Poor international distribution, the topics addressed in the films and their aesthetics also shape Polish cinema as minor. Given that post-communist societies are adapting to new models of work and life, and that digital culture in film is now a staple of worldwide cinema, but especially of costly American productions, the way minor world cinemas handle the digital should be of particular interest as it can inform our understanding of the possibilities of digital cinema as a whole.

**Film and trompe-l’œil**

_Trompe l’œil_ is a pictorial movement characterized by the desire to reproduce reality in order to catch the eye of the unsuspecting watcher. A technical prowess, the _trompe l’œil_ painting implies a game with the watcher who ‘[…] unconsciously feels a vertigo or at least a kind of philosophical doubt that brings him to reflect upon the nature of the world of appearances’ (Marlier, 1964, p. 105, my translation). This technique is thus fundamentally linked with a willingness to create an illusion through a representation as realistic as possible. Although that is _trompe l’œil_’s specificity, it of course concerns to some extent any sort of realism. From its beginnings, and sustained by its apparatus, cinema has been obsessed by this same idea of realism. Obviously, the filmic apparatus is more likely to produce a realistic effect, given the strong iconicity of the photographic image, the presence of sound and, especially, movement, which is always real and cannot be represented. As J. Aumont et al. explain, ‘[…] reproducing the appearance of movement is in fact to reproduce its reality: a movement reproduced is a “real” movement, since the visual manifestation is identical in both cases’ (Aumont, et al., 1983: p. 106, my translation; see also Aumont, 1990, pp. 31-34). Therefore, it is equally unsurprising that cinematic art has been recognized as an incarnation of the realist aesthetic. At one time, A. Bazin was a famously ardent proponent of this idea, at the risk of many incongruities. However, the apparatus itself never was enough to ensure realism: several techniques (of framing, editing, etc.) and norms (of storytelling, narration, verisimilitude, etc.) filled in the gaps. The recent use of digital technology carries on this philosophy, often completing the realistic illusion. Quite literally, computerized compositions mislead the eye by providing shapes that no one could recognize as synthetic, at least if the technique is mastered.

There are other ways to consider _trompe l’œil_ in film, regardless of digital technology. One is the mockumentary (fake documentary). Another is the illusion provided by a metafictional narrative.
in which a reversal of situation perplexes both the character and the viewer. In this filmic trompe l’oeil defined by A. Ledoux (2012, p. 10), ‘[...] what passed for reality in the story turns out to be “unreal”[...], which invites the viewer to question the filmic representation and the indexical value of the filmic image’ (my translation). Therefore, it impacts the whole narrative and implicates the spectator’s participation. However, as Ledoux (2012, p. 209) later says, these filmic trompe l’oeil, feigning a depth they do not possess, ultimately prove somewhat faintly innovative and, perhaps paradoxically, tend to solidify the referential illusion on which popular films depend.

On one hand, cinematic trompe l’oeil concerns films that authentically lure the viewer (mockumentaries), metafictional films incorporating a narrative reversal that changes the parameters of the fictional illusion (filmic trompe l’oeil) and films that employ various illusionistic practices, digital or not, to create a semblance of reality, to consolidate the fictional universe led by the narrative (this concerns most fiction films). On the other hand, some techniques, notably mise en abyme and intermediality, produce an effect of perplexity by exhibiting the reflexive dimension of the representation (Marin, 1988, p. 92), which could shake the boundaries of fiction or permit to question its parameters. In painting, one can think of the extreme example posed by the détrompe l’oeil series of D. Spoerri (1963) where an object (a shower, a muzzle…) is attached to a realistic painting, violently breaking the illusion. In film, other arts and practices can be integrated and be used as an infraction to traditional realistic cinema’s norms. In similar fashion, the DV image may participate to unhinge momentarily the viewer from the film’s referential illusion.

Film and the digital

Digital technology in contemporary cinema seems to follow two main channels, each with its own codes and aesthetic lineage. Affiliated to either classical narrative cinema or animation, the first tendency concerns the creation of effects of the real through effects of reality. Fiction is the dominant genre and realism is achieved by a specific use of filmic language that provides a space for the viewer in the film through an imposed course marked by framing, cutting, movement, etc. J.-P. Oudart associates the effect of reality with the effect produced on the viewer by a representational image and its imitation of natural human perception, notably dependent on (pictorial) perspective and aided by certain aesthetic, cultural and scenographic codes of verisimilitude; this system of representation in turn produces an effect of the real by which the spectator finds himself included in the narrative, images and sounds, therefore perceiving the shapes on the screen as things and beings rather than as the result of a representational process (see Aumont, et al., 1983, p. 107 and Aumont, 1990, p. 82). Of course, each of these effects draws on the another, and the combined effect of real-ity maintains the effectiveness of cinematic realism. To traditional methods (invisible editing, matching of sounds and images, etc.) are added the digital possibilities of image modification. The second trend of digital cinema aims to create effects of contingency, intimacy or disclosure, and exploits the additional mobility and convenience that DV cameras allow, being lightweight and portable. It also embeds other kinds of images (produced by cameras used by the characters) into the narrative and the main film track which sustains it, potentially prompting a reflection on the very idea of filmic representation and the necessary point of view attached to it. That is the case in all the films chosen for this study, but also other Polish films, such as Moje pieczone kurczaki (My Fried Chickens, I. Siekierzyńska, 2002), where a woman renews her emotional attachment to her husband by filming him with a DV camera and watching the footage. Although one could not identify the particular use of digital cameras described here as characteristic of a trend in Polish cinema (such
use of DV images is surely more and more prominent in all cinemas worldwide), it is nonetheless worth noting that Polish cinema does feature a certain awareness of the power of intermediality. Canonical examples from the period of the cinema of moral concern, an important movement of Polish cinema from the 70s and 80s, include Człowiek z marmuru (Man of Marble, A. Wajda, 1976) and Amator (Camera Buff, K. Kieślowski, 1979). Both showcase amateur filmmaking in minor settings (school and private life), its complicated relationship to censorship in socialist Poland and the potency of moving images with regard to either the subversion or strengthening of instances of power. While the instance of power confronted by those films’ characters was the Polish regime itself, after 1989 this dynamic changed and today, for independent Polish cinema and filmmakers, American film seems a more likely adversary as it dominates Polish screens. None of the films mentioned in this study identifies American cinema in any way, but by using digital images, they do claim this technology which, as a paragon of technological evolution, is generally associated with American and Hollywood productions. In this context of minor or independent filmmaking, realism does remain a concern for filmmakers and spectators. Nevertheless, while the aim of the Hollywood film in using digital technology is generally to improve the reproduction (or representation) of reality already offered by the film apparatus (and often to impress the public by the expensive efficiency of the effects on display), for independent films or those produced outside of the large-scale film industry, which more readily use non- or semi-professional cameras, another mode of representation of reality is preferred. While still likely to employ the usual codes of realism, they can also profit from the technical freedom associated with the light DV camera, often resulting in the greater visibility of the writing or making of the film.

In addition, the realism of video images can be significantly different from the one provided by the classical narrative film. Watching video footage, the viewer will tend to interpret using codes commonly associated with documentary or amateur film, modes generally considered to be non-fictional and truthful with respect to their enunciator and potentially their content. These codes are precisely related to the random use of the device (approximate movement), to an appearance of improvisation (weak profilmic organization⁴, less centripetal framing), to an image and sound track considered of poor quality (blurring, failing light, grain, resonance, sound instability) that all encourage to see or read the film as if it were a documentary. As R. Odin (1984, p. 267) explains, ‘[…] the reader [or viewer] builds himself an image of the Enunciator, presuming of its reality’ (my translation). Classical narrative cinema itself can make use of such images while, for instance, characters wield cameras or smartphones. Those films thus include images captured by this non- or semi-professional DV camera which generates a point of view differing – ideologically and plastically – from the one presented by the other shots. Out of all the dimensions of the image, the fiction film usually promotes the diegetic because it brings about a realistic effect. By definition, diegesis is the organization, the correlation of all elements of signification activated by the film, whether they relate to image, sound or narrative. Other dimensions of the image – iconic, plastic and profilmic – must contribute to the effect of realism and avoid appearing for what they are independently of the diegesis: respectively a reference to the real world, to the materiality of the image and to its actuality. The high-caliber type of digital intervention (special effects) is carried out first on the plastic level, but only in order to enrich the other dimensions of the image, ultimately the diegetic one. In contrast, the plasticity of the more gritty non-professional digital image will tend to be more visible, especially if it is included in a film with generally neat and professional looking shots. However, a certain realism will be associated with the ‘poor’ image by virtue of the evident plasticity and the semiotic value of authenticity that it conveys.
Considering the first trend, the filmic *trompe l’œil* does not feature an illusion that would be at the expense of the viewer, while in painting *trompe l’œil* does intend to completely deceive the viewer. Indeed several synthetic effects are now created in shots to add objects or change the appearance and movement of figures, generally unbeknownst to the audience, and even films that are not oriented toward the creation of special effects employ such techniques. However, the viewer does not take the cinematic image for a true representation of reality, at least in fiction. The deception induced by digital effects generally operates on the level of the fictional narrative and contributes to enrich it and it does so following the tradition of classical narrative. A digital effect that is too visible can soon be seen as a technical mistake by the public who will detect an undue intrusion on the image. If a significant effect becomes visible, it must be striking enough to justify this intervention. In such a case, the viewer may admire the technical prowess which then participates in the spectacular aspect of the film. Film involves such operations more and more, so much so that live action shooting becomes only one element of many in the making of the film, the others being, besides traditional editing, painting, processing, composition and image overlay, 2D and 3D animation. Understood in this sense, the digital *trompe l’œil* in film presupposes the integration of visual forms in the closed universe of a fiction and not in reality itself.

If digital cinema often refers to high-end technology, it is not limited to it. The digital age has enabled the proliferation of inexpensive and user-friendly cameras, and image quality varies greatly depending on the equipment and the use made of it. While high-performance DV cameras, used for shooting major productions, provide an image quality somewhat guaranteed by their power, but also by lighting, by attentive organization of the profilmic and by framing, the amateur generally produces an image of comparatively and seemingly ‘poor’ quality. The poverty of this image corresponds, in the normative perspective promoted by commercial and institutional cinema, to a visibility of the materiality of the image, or even to poor staging (profilmic) and to an unstable framing. Whether this camera serves to shoot scenes or an entire film, it offers freedom of movement and encourages a certain proximity between the subject shot and the camera, or an effect of contingency. When DV images of this type are inserted into a feature film that favors images corresponding to criteria of traditional fiction cinema, realism operates, among other things, by virtue of the aesthetic divide, by the shift between images of obvious fictionality and others where it is deemed unusual because of their aesthetic proximity to documentary or home-made images.

The fictionality of ‘poor’ digital images is especially problematic for the viewer because he or she will have already been in contact with many aesthetically similar images on the Internet where such kind of videos propagate. Given their commonness, the spectator can easily recognize them for what they are or seem to be, amateur videos, guaranteeing the efficiency of the intermedial process. As L. Roy (2009, p. 319) points out, ‘[...] intermediality is a cultural phenomenon [...] in so far as it depends on the film reader’s knowledge of the cultural museum made up of works and means of expression, of forms and figures associated with various means of expression [...]’ (my translation). In such a case where the two types of images described above alternate, the ‘poor’ digital image is less likely to contribute to the fictional illusion than it is to cast doubt on the fictional universe and its stability, not unlike other marks of filmic enunciation. It then produces an effect that could be called *détrompe l’œil*.

We can see how by thinking about digital cinema, we should also be inclined to think about modes of representation, realism, modes of production, and to reconsider the intermedial use of filmic or video images in film and how it can be linked with the very idea of ‘digital cinema’ as a whole. This intermediality, although – or precisely because – it is not a new process in cinema, can
serve to reflect upon fiction, reality and film’s reenactment of it through moving or lifelike images that play out seemingly without any point of view attributable to a stance, and consequently to a way of thinking. Some contemporary Polish productions use digital technology in a similar fashion—that is, an intermedial DV image—and do so in order to accentuate the effect of proximity to characters or even to reveal key moments of the story otherwise hidden from view. In all cases selected for this study, the DV image helps thwart the falseness denounced by the films while calling into question the point of view associated with moving images of any kind, digital or not. Furthermore, the figures which embody this falseness are linked to social realities and issues that affect contemporary Poland, specifically consumerism and the superficiality of modern life, which are frequent themes in today’s Polish films. Critical discourse is accomplished in part through the figure of the DV camera (but mostly the image it produces and its intervention throughout the main film track), which exhibits pieces of reality where social illusion no longer holds, where some characters’ vulnerabilities are revealed, where their faults—and their society’s faults—are pointed out. In this perspective, the films’ intermediality contributes to a kind of détrompe l’oeil that reverses social illusion, itself denounced as a trompe l’oeil. The effect of real-ity produced is therefore likely to lead to a critical posture on the part of the viewer.

Wesele

I will begin with W. Smarzowski’s 2004 film, not because it necessarily serves as an analytical blueprint for the others—none of them really use digital images in exactly the same way—but because it features both a clear critical discourse and a consistent use of the DV camera throughout. In his adaptation of a classic Polish play by S. Wyspiański (published in 1901), Smarzowski produces a scathing caricature of Polish society. The film begins with the wedding ceremony of a young couple but quickly moves on to the wedding party where most of the narrative is set up. In the original play, an ‘[...] assault on traditional patriotism [...]’ (Eile, 2000, p. 170), the foundational literary, cultural and ethical paradigm of Polish romanticism is subjected to Wyspiański’s criticism, which is characterized by ‘[...] his conviction that [Polish national mythology’s] illusions uphold quixotic dreams and the consequent inability to act’ (Eile, 2000, p. 172). Thoroughly modernizing this canonical work of significant cultural value, Smarzowski relentlessly exhibits Polish society’s moral faults through symbolic figures of nationality, which are adapted to contemporary context and therefore complexified by capitalist values: priest, policeman, accountant—all corruptible—the institution of marriage, the newlywed couple, the bigos (a national dish that will ironically make sick most of the guests), a patriotic air interpreted with alcoholic fervor, etc. Of course, as noted by M. Nahlik (2009, p. 323) about the film,

any attempt to illustrate national identity-related characters from a particular group of people and their interactions in a limited time frame implies a certain schematism.

Although it doesn’t mean the negative scope of the stereotypes should be lessened, there is no doubt that to some extent they represent reality. Poles see themselves as religious, patriotic, honorable, hospitable and sociable, prodigal, thriftless, remiss, undisciplined and sometimes abusing alcohol. (my translation)

The film presents these stereotypes and more, emphasizing the desire to keep up appearances,
as well as the greed and hypocrisy of characters who do nothing without self-interest. The supposedly sacred union is perverted as vodka bottles are emptied by the case and as general abjection increases. With a handheld camera, a man shoots ‘everything’, as he is ordered to by his employer, the father of the bride, Wiesław. The film alternates between more than 50 shots filmed using this amateur DV camera and more numerous others from a master track; the amateur shots stand out because of the poor visual quality and the jittery framing and movement of the camera. These images sometimes unexpectedly reveal more vividly the characters’ flaws.

After the initial ceremony, as the married couple receives wishes of happiness from the guests, a shot taken from far away with the DV camera lets the viewer hear some of the guests undermining the couple’s ingenuousness: ‘It’s because he got her pregnant. He did pretty well for himself.’ Shortly after, in a faraway shot of the father talking on the phone while standing near a dry toilet, a voice-over dialogue of guests criticizing the buffet is heard: ‘This sausage is cheap, green and smelly [...]. And this cake, I won’t touch it.’ Although these last comments seem trivial, appearances do count for Wiesław as the rest of the sequence makes clear. A luxury car soon approaches: his gift for the couple, proudly displayed before the guests. ‘Shoot everything, you hear? Everything’, Wiesław says to the cameraman as he walks proudly toward the car.

In the rented space where the wedding party and the rest of the film take place, a DV shot shows the married couple, taken from a distance, smiling and unknowing of some guests’ remarks, once again heard in a voice-over, regarding the unplanned pregnancy that supposedly forced the woman into marriage (those rumors will turn out to be true). And so the party can commence, featuring a lot of alcohol and questionable games. The video camera shows some of these rituals, and the annoyed look of the young wife forced to participate: a balloon is placed between her and her husband’s pelvis and both must push their hips up to make it burst, feigning intercourse; the bride holds between her thighs an empty bottle in which a blindfolded man must introduce a long phallic object that hangs from his waist; a few women must insert an egg through the bottom leg of a man’s pants, carry it along the leg and pull it out from the participant’s unzipped fly, etc. In all these cases, the camera is close to the action and the characters.

Some guests offer their wishes of happiness to the camera, often in an artificial and clumsy way (a drunken maid of honor laughs through it, and a man, also drunk, records his message standing next to the bathroom door, using vulgar language and commenting on Poland where, he says, one is ‘ankle deep in urine’). Near the end of the film, the bride faints after discovering her grandfather’s corpse hidden in the case of a musician. The cameraman — her lover, we soon learn — takes her outside where he shows her images he secretly shot of the altercation that preceded the death of the old man. The viewers are simultaneously informed of this part of the story. The footage shows the grandfather and his son quarrelling over a piece of land Wiesław had promised a gangster in exchange for the luxury car. He admits that this car was the condition required by his son-in-law to accept to marry his daughter. Wiesław then leaves. The grandfather suffers a stroke also on camera since the cameraman remained hidden and filming after Wiesław’s exit. It is thus almost systematically that the DV camera image carries a truth which disturbs the initial stilted appearances. And it follows that the gradual unravelling of the sacred institution of marriage, and of other notable national figures of moral authority, is set in motion by this added point of view which constantly multiplies the viewer’s perception, heightening his critical reading of the film.
Mauled by critics at the time of its release, M. Treliński’s film is part of a revival of the cinema of moral concern. These films are characterized by ‘[…] their setting in contemporary Poland and sensitivity to social issues that are nevertheless represented from the perspective of an individual faced with important moral choices’ (Mazierska, 2007, p. 143). Like other contemporary films, Egości offers an acerbic look on the materialism of the young urban elite that has benefited economically from the change of political regime (as opposed to much of the population). The material or professional success achieved by the four characters whose fates are intertwined in this mosaic do not immunize them against the disillusionment that will turn out to be fatal for some. After his lover has abandoned him, Filip, an architect, willingly burns to death in his own home after a night of delirium. Anka and Młody are overwrought addicts. At the center of the plot is Smutny (literally translated as ‘sad’), a musician disgusted by his employment as a jingles composer.

Wide panoramic overhead shots of Warsaw open and close the film, and also separate inner sections, suggesting that the filmmaker’s criticism applies to more than just these characters: the inhabitants are of a similar ilk as the city, immersed in an almost permanent darkness, by extension, a moral darkness, at least for those who blindly subscribe to the new ideology of success. The film does seem to mock traditional Polish symbols, particularly in a scene where Filip and Smutny go on a rampage in the city with a bunch of soldiers, occupying a monument dedicated to dead soldiers and a church-like setting dominated by a big cross. In this city, symbol of the new Poland, only a premature and feeble child can be born, as shown in the penultimate scene which brings the film to a close on an expected sour note. After the first extreme long shot of Warsaw, the story begins with the attempted suicide of Smutny’s girlfriend. Anka is preparing a dessert topped with deadly barbiturates. She’s raving mad and viewing a recording of her own face, broadcasted on the TV screen: footage filmed with a small DV camera that an early shot clearly displays, laying on a table. A series of close-ups produced with the DV camera alternate with other shots in which Anka observes herself as she is displayed on the screen. Her melodramatic confession is aimed at Smutny; with her face contorted, she cries and screams. The scene is meant to be outrageous.

Rather than directly confronting her boyfriend – she later will – Anka opts for the transmediation provided by the camera’s poor but revealing image, through interposed screens: Smutny will view the content later on. Anka’s actions and histrionics do come off as overly dramatic. This excess is both put forward and made distant by the scene’s aesthetics. The close-up framing of the face, the insistent gaze at the camera and the image’s coarseness all contribute to express the character’s solitude and despair, but it also overloads the viewer with a pathos made unbearable especially by the realness and bluntness of the DV image. The scene fully embraces Anka’s crisis but detachment is also part of its configuration with respect to aesthetics (editing, framing, inclusion of the digital image) and staging (Anka is looking at herself – we can surmise she does so repeatedly – on the screen, strangely withdrawn). The DV camera, such as it is used narratively and aesthetically, thus serves as a means to communicate a message but also as a way to distance oneself from it, allowing both intimacy and detachment. From then on, the film questions the obsessive relationship to objects, especially technology or any material goods by the means of which a social status can be ascertained. This introductory scene furthers this criticism with the idea of the commodification of human suffering – now more mediated than ever through various screens – but also the narcissism associated with capitalist values and property, which the film’s characters all incarnate. Incidentally, the DV camera figures here both as a luxury item in the Polish socio-economic context and as ‘one
of the most potent symbols of postmodern culture’ (Mazierska, 2007, p. 162).

Sala samobójców

While Egoiści criticized consumer society as experienced by those who have succeeded in the new Poland – represented by the generation of 30- and 40-year-olds – J. Komasa’s Sala samobójców questions the power dynamics and emotional disorders that can affect teenagers while strolling the Internet and its social networks. In Egoiści, the DV camera served to symbolize postmodernism; in Sala samobójców, smartphones and their extension, the Internet and Facebook, figure early twenty-first century hypermodernism. Through the transmediality of Web media, which also becomes intramediality insofar as Web images often take the place of the entire film screen – it then emulates the Web image\(^8\) –, the narrative is based on the problem of the proliferation of screens, the permanent representation of self through them and the unbalanced relationship that this proliferation of images sometimes causes. The film tells the story of a teenager who appears to be rather marginal although he comes from a wealthy family. From a socio-economic perspective, the luxury in which Dominik and his family live is exceptional. This is significant because, although Poland’s economic situation has improved since the early 1990s, unemployment is still high and the country is experiencing a serious brain drain. This of course does not preclude a certain elite to consolidate in large cities, and it is in this social context that the film takes place. However, as is the case in Egoiści, the elite is here derided. Material success and wealth are presented as an illusion in so far as they fail to preserve citizens from moral decay. Lack of communication occurs early on and Dominik turns away from his parents. He attends high school with no particular problem until he kisses a male classmate at a party and is soon after ridiculed on Facebook (where images of the kiss have been posted) and at school. Desperate, he shuts himself in his room and spends his time surfing the Web. Via the degraded image of a webcam, he communicates with a young woman who introduces him to the Suicide Room, an unusual website inviting suicidal teens to participate in a virtual experience. After his first suicide attempt, his parents hire a psychologist who manages to get their child to come out of his room. Nevertheless, he will later commit suicide in the bathroom of a club while a young couple film his delirium and death with a smartphone. As the last shot shows, this footage eventually joins the Internet jumble of videos of uncertain origin that the Web contains and where the public is invited to comment.

The film brings together various types of images: the very slick and professionally photographed ones of a master film track; computer and website screen captures (including the all-animated sequences of the Suicide Room simulation); Web videos; images produced by the protagonist’s webcam; videos produced by the camera of a cellphone. This multiplication of all kinds of images recalls both cinema’s representational inclination and contemporary society’s obsession with the visual, more and more prone to self-representation. This especially concerns teenagers whose identity is strongly associated with the use and production of images.

The virtual space of the Suicide Room is reconstructed in a series of computer-animated sequences where participants, represented by means of an avatar as if they were characters in a video game, interact outside the social norms that alienate them. As it turns out, the synthetic animated image extends – technologically and ideologically – the original image produced by the webcam. It deploys a new means of communication operating on the fringes of the social or familial spheres, and to a certain extent outside of the main cinematic narrative which moves from images of the master track to various kinds of digital intervals closely linked to that master track. To better
distinguish among the different types of digital images used in the film, we may say that the digital propriety of cameras and phones is associated with the possibility of concealed filming (as was the case in Wesele) or with a sense of privacy (which was also made evident in Egoiści), and that the virtual world of the Suicide Room is associated with a concealing of the user who physically appears not as himself. However, he can paradoxically create a strong and sincere bond with others, that which he can’t seem to accomplish in real life, with his family or friends. It follows that authenticity and deception are intertwined, and that the technological means of reproducing reality (or of setting up a new – virtual – reality) are here as advanced as they can be misleading. In effect, the bonds that Dominik ends up creating in the Suicide Room will only be beneficial in appearance.

One of the first digital intervals of importance in the film happens when a video of Dominik’s gay kiss appears on the Web. This upload and its following distribution through social networks will have more of an impact than the kiss itself to the extent that the video is going to channel the attention of numerous Internet viewers, generating various reactions online and at school. In a way, it is the video that initiates the subsequent sequence of events by displaying Dominik’s sexual ambiguity, which is rejected by the student community as soon as it is revealed to be sincere and not just a game: while wrestling, during gym class, with the boy he kissed, Dominik unwillingly gets an erection, prompting the students and digital communities to read the video of the kiss in a serious light. Therefore, the digital video image serves as both a public and a private revealor. For Dominik himself doesn’t seem particularly aware of his sexual desires that will, for the rest of the film, be sublimated through his virtual exploration of the Suicide Room and a destructive friendship with a young female, all of which could very easily be interpreted and understood as a reaction not only to the rejection he experienced, but more profoundly as a reaction to his own conflicted feelings toward his sexuality. The moral implications of this issue — public and internalized homophobia — are rather lightly threaded by the film, and understandably so since the subject of homosexuality and gay rights in Poland has been the object of media scrutiny and political controversy since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Polish films have seldom advanced the topic up front without resorting to stereotypes or oversimplification. By associating it to themes of digital representation and communication, as well as teen depression, unrest and suicide, J. Komasa’s film underlines the contemporaneity and relevancy of gay identity as a potent figure for Polish fiction.

Another digital interval of importance takes place at the end of the film when two teens record Dominik’s agony. Having swallowed a bottle of pills, he is soon struck with severe pain. In a series of shots, full of camera jerks and jump cuts, he is shown trying to induce vomiting, crying, shrieking, etc., looking directly at the camera, pathetically screaming for his mother. This pathos is once again, as in Egoiści, rendered unbearable on account of its magnification by the framing (a close shot) and by the specific plasticity of the coarse digital image (binded aesthetically to the realness of amateur videos). Using the familiar and ordinary DV image to represent this ultimate act of desperation, the filmmaker brings forth the film’s critical discourse regarding the new hypermediatic society and highlights its potential deceptiveness, but he also complicates matters by spreading the use of digital images in film to web locations and virtual animated spaces, consequently multiplying viewpoints and confusing the eye as to what it should consider to be a safe image.

The use of digital images as détrompe l’œil, as was suggested in this article, hopefully invites us to contemplate the usefulness of doubt regarding the appearances promoted by our societies, especially considering their increasingly strong bind to the technologies and market economy on which they depend. As these images penetrate the fictional narrative and the main film track, and since they contribute to a critical discourse attached to social realities that exist outside or in the
sidelines of the grand sociopolitical narrative, which is principally played out by the G8 countries, they participate in a different (or differing) kind of fiction. Unlike the Hollywood paradigm, which favors a closed fictional or diegetic universe and a corresponding use of the digital, these contemporary Polish films explore the reflective potentialities of digital filmic images. Through *mise en abyme* and intermediality, the spectatorial eye traverses images slantwise, noting perhaps his own duality and that of the real world he inhabits, where he is himself constantly in representation, and wherein he also produces images. These kinds of practices are not new to cinema. Nevertheless, it must be noted how relevant they are today where the concern for representation is constantly reactivated, questioning us regarding the ethical standards that the images we produce convey and, moreover, the social behaviors we choose to adopt.

**Endnotes**

1 In this article, the adjective minor describes what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as minorities or the minoritarian. The authors distinguish ‘[…] the majoritarian as a constant and homogeneous system; minorities as subsystems; and the minoritarian as a potential, creative and created, becoming […] whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and deterritorializations of the mean or majority’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 117).

2 I am compelled to remark on the relation between representation, illusion and realism by quoting J. Aumont (1990, p. 77) at length: ‘Representation is the more general phenomenon, one that allows the viewer to see an absent reality "by proxy", which is offered as a surrogate. Illusion is a perceptual and psychological phenomenon which representation produces […] in certain, defined psychological and cultural conditions. Finally, realism is a set of social rules intended to regulate the relation between representation and reality to the satisfaction of the society that sets these rules’ (my translation). Although the rules which govern realism, illusion and representation change depending on societies, genres, time periods, etc., cinema is vastly an industrial art, and American films, spread continuously throughout every market available, continue to generally define the matrix of realist, illusionistic and representational practices.

3 But documentary itself is partly fictionalized in the sense that the putting together of the film will necessarily transform any reality captured by the camera: ‘[…] on account of its material expression (moving image, sound), any film unrealizes what it represents and transforms it into a spectacle’ (Aumont and Bergala, 1983, p. 71, my translation).

4 Profilmic refers to the reality captured by the camera. In fiction (and documentary), this reality is generally organized and staged. D. Chateau (1983, p. 54) mentions that ‘[…] the film works on the profilmic for the benefit of the diegetic’ (my translation).

5 For this distinction of the structural levels of filmic images, see D. Chateau (1983, p. 60).

6 L. Manovich (1995) noted that talking about digital cinema as we did and still often do would soon be obsolete, and it probably now is, insofar as the digitization of the industry is almost complete. Analog film has already become the exception. Technology thus continues to transform the parameters which characterize cinema.

7 Critics called the film empty, self-aggrandizing, superficial, even accusing it of artistic blackmail (for a summary, see Jagielski, 2013, p. 465).
Intermediality of the digital video image

From the phenomenon of intermediality, L. Roy (2009, p. 325) distinguishes between transmediality and intramediality. In my example, the film's transmediality refers to the transfer of the Internet's multiplication of screens and variety of pictural aesthetics to the film's aesthetics. Its intramediality manifests itself when the film screen lends itself to digital web media, or when the film screen shows this media used by characters.

However, as S. Jagielski (2013, pp. 481-483) points out, the film's critical reception in Poland generally avoided the gay angle or minimized its importance.

Films


Works Cited
