

Anima(l) Moralia, or Righteous Anger: Agnieszka Holland's Spoor (2017)

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Abstract:

Agnieszka Holland's *Spoor* (*Pokot*, 2017), an adaptation of Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009/2019), tells the story of an old woman, Janina Duszejko (Agnieszka Mandat), who advocates for animal rights; she uses every measure to fight the local hunting culture. Due to the centrality of the relationship between human beings and the world of nature, Holland's film refers to the recent debates aimed at de-centralizing the human subject. As I will argue, despite its attempt to alter the human-animal relationship, *Spoor* conveys anthropocentric perspectives and as such it does not participate in "the non-human turn". Instead, the film can be linked to the "emotional turn" taking precedence in the humanities during the last two decades, in that it expresses the director's affective response to the political realities of contemporary Poland, especially its unshaken patriarchal power that subordinates the social margins.

keywords: non-human turn, emotional turn, affect, anthropocentrism, Polish cinema, women's cinema

In the opening of his *Minima Moralia: Reflections from damaged life* - whose title refers to *Magna Moralia*, ascribed to Aristotle – Theodor W. Adorno states that philosophy is no longer "teaching of the good life. What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption" (Adorno, 1951/2020, p. 15). At the end of the book, he sees a way to get over the impasse: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all

things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption” (Adorno, 1951/2020, p. 247). To achieve this, “Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world” (Adorno, 1951/2020, p. 247). According to Adorno, cinema was the form of cultural production least likely to change perspectives as it “forces the justice of each and every world order in every country, stridently and threateningly into the audience's eyes and ears, in order to teach them [...] the old fear” (Adorno, 1951/2020, p. 206). In his biased attitude to cinema as an epitome of the “cultural industry” manufacturing mass culture, he overlooked its premonitory sensitivity to new fears and disquietedness as demonstrated, for example, by the horror genre. Recently, cinema, television, and global streaming platforms responded to profound changes in the perspectives from which humanity is approached, described as the “non-human turn” and “emotional turn”. To explore this revelatory and subversive potential of popular culture I examine Agnieszka Holland’s *Spoor (Pokot)*, an adaptation of Olga Tokarczuk’s novel *Drive your plough over the bones of the dead* (2009/2019).

I approach the film as an attempt to break with anthropocentric and patriarchal systems whose centuries-long hegemony resulted in the oppression of humans and non-humans who are weak and marginalized. I propose the concept of “*anima(l) moralia*,” which compounds the Jungian concept of *anima*-- referring to the feminine part of the unconscious--and animal to suggest figuratively a deep connection between struggles for feminine and animal subjectivity that are indispensable for a new moral system to emerge.¹

¹ For a more detailed discussion of women and animals being victims of patriarchy see, for example: Adams & Donovan, 1995).

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In his review of *Spoor*, Sebastian Smoliński appreciates the Holland's political courage for making "a political film that drives a wedge into the Polish debate on the protection of the world of nature, climate change, and the Polish Roman-Catholic Church that uncritically promotes anthropocentrism" (Smoliński, 2017, p. 72). In one of the interviews promoting the film, Holland confesses that in *Spoor* "[she] wanted to show anger" (Holland, 2017, January 29). In another interview, she said: "In *Spoor*, what is especially important is the female protagonist's anger which is aimed at a lawless reality" (Holland, 2017, February 26). Smoliński's review relates the content of the film to the socio-political reality of contemporary Poland, whereas the director declares that the film expresses her emotional response to this reality. In what will follow, I explore both aspects of the film. First, I examine the narrative content and its cinematic rendition, then I look at the formal qualities as channeling the director's emotions. I examine Holland's traces of authorial presence in the textuality of the film, yet not the traditional understanding of authorship as thematic and stylistic consistency, but rather as affective aspects of certain narrative and formal devices that express her discontent with the surrounding reality. I also contextualize the cinematic expression of her negative affects with her publicly performed critique of Polish political life to demonstrate that Holland's authorship is informed by political activism that is manifested on both a textual and extra-textual level. Accordingly, in this article I conceive of the author as a psycho-emotional agency that leaves traces in the cinematic diegesis. Although Roland Barthes' diagnosis of "the death of the author" still has currency, it is safe to say that the empirical authors have been buried prematurely and they return triumphantly or sometimes even revengefully to critical and political discourse (cf. Caughie, 2008, pp. 408-423).

Holland's *Spoor* is an example of such triumphant return.

The film tells the story of Janina Duszejko, a retired civil engineer who works as a part-time English teacher in a local elementary school. She lives on her own with her two beloved she-dogs in a little house located on the outskirts of the town. One day, her dogs disappear. In despair, the woman reports this to the local police, yet she is treated with indifference, if not open hostility. Desperate, she asks her pupils to search the forest for her pets, but their efforts are in vain. In the meantime, the woman befriends several people from the margins of the local community, while also protesting the hunting escapades of the local (male) establishment (including the local priest). They show a ruthless contempt for her, deeming her old and crazy. Soon, the hunters die in mysterious circumstances, and it looks as if the cruel acts were committed by animals. When it is revealed at the end of the film that Duszejko murdered all the men, she and her friends are presented in an idyllic "family dinner scene" whose ontological status remains unclear; it may be her dream, or a post-mortem vision of a secular progressive paradise.

As the content of *Spoor* indicates, due to the centrality of the relationship between human beings and the world of nature, Holland's film refers to the recent debates aimed at decentralizing the human subject by means of linking it with the realm of the non-human, including not only animals but also other organic and geophysical systems and various technologies. In the first section of this article, I investigate how *Spoor* addresses the "non-human turn" which, as Richard Grusin explains, is often confused with the posthuman turn but unlike the latter it does not assume "teleology or progress in which we begin with the human and see a transformation from the human to the posthuman, after or beyond the human" (Grusin, 2015, p. ix). Instead, as he claims,

[t]he nonhuman turn [...] insists (to paraphrase Latour) that “we have never been human” but that the human has always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman—and that the human is characterized precisely by this indistinction from the nonhuman. (Grusin, 2015, p. x)

As I will demonstrate, *Spoor* attempts to establish a non-anthropocentric perspective, however it remains within the anthropocentric limits of cinematic representation. Specifically, on the level of content, the film calls for a “nonhuman turn”, while on the level of cinematic form its intervention into the hegemonic system of representation remains insufficient.² Eventually, *Spoor* presents a traditional concept of animal rights that, as Cary Wolf indicates, is founded on such strands of the humanist tradition as Peter Singer’s utilitarianism and the neo-Kantianism of Tom Regan that are “effacing the very difference of the animal other that it sought to respect” (Wolfe, 2003, p. 33). While struggling with cinematic anthropomorphism, Holland’s film represents what Joseph DesJardins called “*anthropocentric extensionism*” which assumes that “[e]thics is extended beyond traditional boundaries, but only human beings continue to possess moral standing” (DesJardins, 1993/2013, p. 105). As *Spoor* develops its compassionate narrative around a female character, the film arguably presents a gendered “anthropocentric extensionism”.

Aside from its formal struggles to break with a hegemonic system of representation founded on the principles of anthropocentrism and patriarchy, Holland’s film participates

² In his article, Sebastian Smoliński also expresses skepticism about the film’s pro-ecological message (Smoliński, 2018).

in the political debate concerning the ecological movement in contemporary Poland.³ As Stephen Duncombe argues, art, or cultural production for that matter, is capable of making an argument “through story and myth” that address “fears and desire, imagination and fantasy”. Art goes beyond reality. “It is the animation of an abstraction, a transformation from ideal to expression. *Spectacle is a dream on display*” (Duncombe, 2007, p.30). *Spoor* offers a cinematic spectacle that presents a feminist and ecological fantastical tale sending a bold ideological message. The film uses the affective power of the cinematic image to criticize the national rhetoric used by the Polish right-wing government,⁴ while revealing its oppressive nature based on patriarchal order. It also criticizes the Roman-Catholic Church in Poland that, as it is shown in the film, legitimizes the economic and political power held by the overly negative characters of the local businessman, policeman, and civil servant. Holland presents these embodied patriarchal structures of power in a grotesquely amplified, or – as many critics have claimed – simplistic fashion (cf. Chełminiak (2017), Memches (2017), Banaszkiewicz, (2017) and Zaremba (2017)). I propose to approach the aesthetic strategy employed by the film to represent patriarchal institutions as an expression of authorial emotions. Thereby, I relate *Spoor* and its authorship to the “emotional turn” taking precedence in the humanities in the last two decades.

³ Its action takes place in a small town near to the Polish-Czech border. The area has recently been an object of political conflict between these two countries due to the pollution caused by the Polish energy industry. The Czech Republic complained about this to the European Union, yet the Polish government did not respond to it as requested by the EU.

⁴ The right-wing government of the Law and Justice party (PiS) hold power between 2015-2023.

Addressed also as an “affective turn”, the “emotional turn” emerged in the 1990s,⁵ often tracing its genealogy to Baruch Spinoza’s work (Spinoza, 1677/1985) and its reinterpretation by Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze, 1990). Works by Brian Massumi (1995), Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995) have also been instrumental for its emergence. The “emotional turn” intervened into modernist rationality and the customary opposition between body and mind. During the last two decades, this turn has significantly affected all strands of the humanities including film and media studies, feminism, and ecology. Sara Ahmed’s book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004/2015) offered a systemic examination of various emotions and their significance in different spheres of individual and collective life practices. Instead of approaching them as responses to specific situations, she argued that emotions are instrumental forces in politics and culture. Ahmed’s discussion of the emotion of anger as inherently connected with feminism usefully contextualizes Holland’s comments on *Spoor* as expressing her anger towards the current political situation in Poland. Emotions, Ahmed writes, are crucial “in the politicization of subjects” (Ahmed, 2004/2015, p. 171), while confessing the anger she “felt about how being a girl seemed to be about what you shouldn’t do” (2004/2015, p. 171). As she further explains, “anger is a form of ‘against-ness’” (2004/2015, p. 174). “Feminist anger” results from interpreting the world; it is “a reading of how, for example, gender hierarchy is implicated in other forms of power relations”. Anger directed at specific objects or social relations “moves feminism into a bigger critique of ‘what is’”. (Ahmed, 2004/2015, p. 176). Holland’s anger, expressed in her public statements and in the film, are inherently connected, confirming Ahmed statement that “[a]nger is creative;

⁵ For more detailed discussion see: Clough & Halley (2007), Seigworth & Gregg (2010).

it works to create language with which to respond to that which is against” (2004/2015, p. 176) and, as she notes, it is also a performative act (2004/2015, p. 177). Accordingly, I propose to approach *Spoor* as an attempt to create language to express Holland’s authorial emotion of anger directed towards Polish political reality. To do so, I will also take inspiration from Stefania Lucamante’s concept of “righteous anger”, which she sees “as the culmination of indignation towards injustice [that] produces reflective impressions from which stem the will to denounce things and the manner in which we live” (2020, p. 3). *Spoor* expresses Holland’s (conceived here as an empirical authorial agency) emotional response to various forms of patriarchal oppression that is legitimized and supported by the Church. She directs her rage at a societal order built on the oppression and exploitation of those who are weak and marginalized. Thereby, Holland’s anger expressed in the film can be seen as a form of political activism. In his discussion of the relationship between art and political activism, Duncombe explains that, “activism is always aimed at effect, whereas art – at affect, and these two seems to be separated from each other” (Duncombe, 2016, p. 118). However, recent research within the field of cognitive science indicates that,

we make sense of our world less through reasoned deliberation of facts and more through stories and symbols that frame the information we receive [...] when it comes to stimulating social change, affect and effect are not discrete ends but are all up in each other’s business. [...] before we act in the world, we must be moved to act. (Duncombe, 2016, p. 119)

As will be explained in this article, *Spoor* employs different representational strategies for depicting those who represent patriarchal power and those who are oppressed and marginalized to mobilize emotions in viewers and possibly encourage them to undertake relevant actions.

(Non)human animals?

In the first scene of the film, Duszejko talks to her beloved dogs, addressing them as her “girls”. Later in the film she calls them her “daughters”. This familiar linguistic practice is a symbolic gesture of admission of an animal to the human family. However, it also locates subjective agency on the human side, while animals remain their passive objects. To put it boldly, a human creature can humanize the animal, yet the latter cannot animalize the former. The scene conspicuously reveals the film’s anthropomorphism (see Smoliński, 2018). When the dogs wake Duszejko, she reads her pets’ energetic movements and barking as an expression of their desire to go for a walk and responds to it accordingly. Her choice of words and the tone of her voice expresses tenderness towards the dogs and an emotional bond with them, however, it can also be seen as demonstrating the substantial difference between human and animal “words” as noted by John Berger:

What distinguished man from animals was the human capacity for symbolic thought, the capacity that was inseparable from the development of language in which words were not mere signals, but signifiers of something other than themselves (Berger, 1977/1980, p.9).

Conversation with the animal, then, does not establish the latter as equal, but conversely validates human superiority, or is even indispensable for maintaining it. As Akira Mizuta Lippit claims,

Although lacking the capacity for human speech, animals remain essential to its constitution. The important role of animals in the metaphysics of speech is also an antithetical one. The economy of human subjectivity and speech is restricted: only human beings are capable of speech, which, in turn, founds the human subject. Animals enter that tautology as a phantasmatic counterpoint to human language. The animal voice establishes an imaginary place of being beyond the threshold of human discourse. (Lippit, 2000, p. 15)

The animals in Holland's film do not function outside of human discourse as established by human speech, but are inscribed into it. The character of Duszejko performs a symbolic transfer of the animal from the negative semiotic space into the realm of logos with its semantic transparency. This transfer is also manifested in the concept of the pet that is tightly connected with the modern division into public and private space, with the latter being organized and filled with various objects that are produced and later purchased. The pet inhabits this space as a nostalgic surrogate of the real animal that has vanished from the modern world (Berger, 1977/1980, p. 14).

When Duszejko's pets vanish, most likely killed by the local hunters, she compensates for it with a peculiar anthropomorphic fantasy. She stages the consecutive deaths of the hunters to look like the animals' acts of vengeance. This prolonged and periodic process of anthropomorphizing animals establishes the primacy of the human over the animal.

Consequently, in Holland's film an idiosyncratic and somehow disconcerting hybridization of animal representation occurs that merges modern and postmodern imagery as described by Steve Baker. According to Baker, the former entails a sentimental and anthropomorphic concept of a domesticated animal, while the latter is its dark and transgressive counterpart that annihilates the principles of human morality through its own existence (Baker, 2000, pp. 7-26). In *Spoor*'s plot, Duszejko domesticates the animals that she sees in anthropomorphic terms, while in the phantasmatic scenario of animal vengeance, when she acts on behalf of the animals, she symbolically establishes them as capable of transgressive behavior that violates the rules of human morality. However, these transgressive acts are still embedded in human affectivity as they originate in anger and a desire for vengeance. Consequently, the filmic animals remain anthropomorphic human projections, without probing the nature of human representation of them. Yet the question arises whether it is possible to go beyond an anthropomorphic perspective in the standard model of cinematic representation.

Anthropomorphism is an act of symbolic annihilation of animals. As Lippit explains, the *Oxford English Dictionary* reports that initially the term referred to the attribution of human traits to divine creatures and only in the first half of the nineteenth century was it used in relation to animals (Lippit, 2000, p. 186). As he writes, in modernism "animals came to occupy the thoughts of a culture in transition. As they disappeared, animals became increasingly the subjects of a nostalgic curiosity" (Lippit, 2000, p. 186). The modernist vanishing of animals was earlier noted and examined by Berger, who in his 1977 essay wrote: "In the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them. And in this new solitude, anthropomorphism makes us doubly

uneasy” (Berger 1977/1980, p.11). Anthropomorphism is a veil hiding animals’ actual absence.

Holland introduces an anthropocentric perspective in the film’s opening sequence, which serves as a visual prologue to the story. It starts with a black screen and Duszejko’s off-screen monologue pondering on astrological issues. Among others, she meditates whether the date of death is already inscribed in the date of birth, which would signify a deterministic order of things. Soon, a sequence of shots follows showing a vast mountainous landscape at dawn. The sunrise symbolizes the predictability and stability of the world of nature. However, the editing of sound and image produces a sequence of symbolic meanings that establish an anthropomorphic perspective: first we see darkness, then we hear spoken words which signify logos, and eventually the screen fills with light, making the world of nature visible. The progression seems to recreate the act of creation for the viewer. The following shots strengthen the anthropocentric perspective by means of a frame composition that follows the rules of renaissance perspective, softening filters that slightly blur the contours of the terrain, and diffused lighting that diminishes color contrasts. These cinematic devices transform the land into a landscape which is implied to be human, and by the same token there is an aesthetic perspective imposed on the world of nature, while Duszejko’s monologue initiates the process of its narrativization. The anthropocentric aspect of the representational strategies becomes even more evident in the low-level shot of a herd of deer, whose bodies we see through grass up to their horns that metonymically mark their presence on the screen. (Fig.1)



Fig. 1 *Spoor* - the opening sequence.

Notwithstanding the careful visual design of the deer shot, it also refers to the stereotypical image of a stag at the rut that epitomizes kitsch imagery and a sentimental variant of anthropocentrism. First, the camera's placement and frame composition fragment the animal body (not unlike how Classical Hollywood cinema fragments the female body), exposing its antlers, which Western hunting culture has transformed into a fetish. The antlers are framed in such a way that they create a symmetrical composition evoking hunting trophies that hang on the walls of manor houses. These collections are always structured into specific patterns that produce an effect of order and beauty. Although the comparison can be questioned as these two occur in cinematic and real spaces respectively, the optical manipulation in the film and consequent aesthetic intervention in the world of nature signify the process of fetishization of animals. The low-level camera placement in this shot suggests its hidden position in the grass which establishes its gaze, and by extension the viewer's gaze, as voyeuristic. The hidden

position of the camera brings to mind a camouflaged hunter and the hunting analogy becomes even more pertinent in moments when the camera changes its focal length, as if it is a pair of binoculars or the touch hole on a hunting gun. Finally, towards the end of the opening sequence, a meaningful editing technique is used: when the animals look to their left off-screen and a second later they seem to be ready to run away, there is a cut, as if preceding their escape to safety, not penetrated by the camera and the viewer's gaze. Arguably, editing saves the viewers from experiencing the uncomfortable position of the animals being beyond their field of vision, thus not knowing what is happening to them. We do not see what they see either. The filmic formal devices do not allow the animals to escape the limits of the cinematic frame. They remain the objects of a bodiless gaze that cannot be reciprocated. This sequence of images, culminating in the vanishing of the animals, substantiates Anat Pick's observation on the relationship between looking at animals and their extinction: "where rare or endangered animals are fatally observed, and where animal sighting acts as a lure and reward against the backdrop of animal vanishing" (Pick, 2015, p. 108). The following shot depicts this threatening power in another symbolic image. After the cut there is a long shot of a hunting pulpit that from afar looks like a guard booth in a concentration camp. The image serves as the background for the title of the film in big red font, which radically contrasts with the monochromatic and softly illuminated landscape. (Fig.2)



Fig. 2 *Spoor* – the opening credits.

Later in the film, there are several episodes that may evoke the presence of an autonomous animal gaze, and by the same token, their subjective agency, however Duszejko’s mediatory presence blocks this potential.⁶ In the first of these episodes there are numerous long shots of horses grazing nearby the road on which Duszejko’s SUV appears. The animals look in her direction, but the shot is not followed with a counter-shot that would present their perspective. Soon after the film cuts to a long shot of Duszejko in her shed, into which a wild boar peeks; the camera is located behind her. We

⁶ In his article, Simon Lewis argues otherwise: “here and in other encounters with wildlife, the camera appears to take on the perspective of the animals, switching angles to look back on the humans. Nature therefore has its own subjectivity, and respecting this subjectivity—the recognition of a soft, penetrable border between humankind and nature—combines with a conventional social cosmopolitanism as the film’s moral imperative” (Lewis, 2019, 539). However, he does not provide any specific example of such a scene, episode, or image. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418815248>

see Duszejko in close-up before another cut to the initial long shot. This sequence of shots establishes an unbalanced politics of gazing; only the human subject is granted the privilege to look at animals, and not vice versa. There is one scene in which hunted animals look at the camera, but it soon transpires that it is Duszejko's nightmarish dream. Thus, the animal gaze exists only as a phantasm, not a realistic option. The dream scene can also be seen as a symbolic evocation of "cinema's failure to enable any meaningful form of cross-species exchange. [...] a failed fantasy of reciprocal recognition" (McMahon & Lawrence, 2015, p. 16). The last example of the primacy of the anthropocentric gaze is especially important as it is crucial for the narrative's development. When Duszejko and Matoga (Wiktor Zborowski) reach the nearby poacher's house, several roedeers appear on screen and stand still looking at the camera. In close-up, Duszejko is shown reciprocating their gaze and encourages Matoga to do the same. "Look", she says. He refuses, as if aware of the exchange being a fantasy only.

The anthropomorphism that is manifestly present in Holland's film implies anthropocentrism. *Spoor* does not invite the viewer to interrogate the relationship between human and non-human that Giorgio Agamben calls the "anthropological machine" (Agamben, 2004, p. 37). Conversely, it hides its workings behind the veil of liberal humanism as demonstrated in both its narrative content and formal devices. In her attitude to animals, Duszejko does not undermine the principle of anthropocentrism, but instead she demands that animals be treated as equal to humans. While she pleads for respect for their lives, she implements Peter Singer's ideas formulated in his seminal book *Animal liberation* (1975), which advocates for animal rights without questioning the

principles of anthropocentrism. While advocating for animal rights, *Spoor* implements “*anthropocentric extensionism*” (DesJardins, 1993/2013, p. 105) as when Duszejko attempts to convince the Police Chief (Andrzej Konopka) that animals feel pain the same way people do, or when the Czech entomologist Boros (Miroslav Krobot) tells her about the Holocaust of an insect species. These analogies with the human world, noble on the level of intention, testify to the impossibility of establishing anything other than human subjectivity. The only thing that can be done is to expand its framework. Both the fictional reality and the formal devices employed in Holland’s film fail to open the film’s textual space for the posthuman or non-human, instead, animals are used as a litmus test to measure the morality of the human characters. The division into protagonists and antagonists is drawn on the basis of their attitude to animals. The main plot of *Spoor* exemplifies what Wolfe calls “a fundamental repression that underlies most ethical and political discourse: repressing the question of nonhuman subjectivity, taking it for granted that the subject is always already human” (Wolfe, 2003, p. 1). The eco-thriller plot simulates animal subjectivity and agency, yet in actuality it testifies to its absence. Duszejko consecutively kills the animals’ tormentors, staging the scenes of murder in such a way as to make them look like the animals’ acts of vengeance. Tacitly, she convinces herself and the viewers that only a human being is in a position to establish, violate, and execute moral principles. The only role an animal can play is that of a passive victim.

In his essay “Becoming-animal in the literary field” (2018), Brian Massumi discusses the paradoxical nature of the contemporary ecological movement while indicating its hidden anthropocentrism. According to Massumi, a common response to the current ecological

catastrophe is technoscientific in that it proposes scientifically elaborated methods of decreasing carbon emission, protecting endangered species, working against climate change, and maintaining natural habitats. As he succinctly notes,

[i]t prescribes as cure the same instrument that brought us to this juncture: human instrumental reason itself. In other words, it employs what humans have prided themselves most on – their ability to dominate nature as the self-declared “rational animal” – as the corrective to the historical exercise of this very ability as it infused the modern capitalist spirit. This approach mobilizes the dominant self-defining characteristic of the human as *pharmakon*: a poisoning, but also a remedy. (Massumi, 2018, p. 265)

Humans have maintained their superior position over all other organic and non-organic forms of life. “Humanity remains master of itself, and of all other creatures, now reduced to the status of dependants in permanent technoscientific foster-care, their existence hanging on the tenuous goodwill of ‘man’” (Massumi, 2018, p. 265). *Spoor* perpetuates such thinking as exemplified in a scene of Duszejko at the police station when she comes to report the murder of a young wild boar that was illegally hunted during the protection period. She throws the carcass of a dead animal onto the chief’s desk, explaining that she is collecting carcasses as she believes that in the future it will be possible to clone these dead animals and bring them back to life. Duszejko believes that humanity is “poisonous” as it kills animals and the surrounding world of nature, yet she trusts that technoscientific progress will save and re-create it. Duszejko’s trust in modern technology is also manifested by the electronic equipment she uses such as a laptop and cell phone. She also

needs her SUV to traverse the wilderness and commit the acts of vengeance on behalf of animals.

A question remains: what is the actual meaning of Duszejko's acts of vengeance on behalf of animals? What is her motivation and what is its ethical dimension? It can be assumed that she experiences empathetic suffering with them and hence she decides to punish those who kill the animals. However, as Massumi notes,

[e]mpathy is what my "essential I" does when it maintains the boundary between myself and "my" others, and feels *for* them, producing a disingenuous feeling of being "like" them. Sympathy is when the boundary of the I is dissolved – but not the difference on either side of it. Sympathy is a bodily falling in with a feeling-with, at the edge of perception. It does not dissolve the self. It produces another, of self and other, across their difference, in the liminal thirdness of affective co-composing. (Massumi, 2018, p. 277).

Duszejko expresses empathy towards animals which locates her within the framework of traditional anthropocentric humanism. The fictional world in *Spoor* functions within Agamben's "anthropological machine" that constantly modifies the relationship between human beings and animals, while keeping its main principle of difference intact. As demonstrated, Holland's film manifests an anthropocentric attitude not only on the narrative level but also on the level of cinematic form that is especially evident in the human-like objectifying gaze of the camera. Unlike Patricia Pisters, who suggests that "it is also possible to read the film as a speculative New Materialist turn" (Pisters, 2020, p. 183), I argue that the film reveals rather the anthropocentric limits of cinema and its

unavoidably ambivalent representation of the world of nature, which was noted by Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway: “As a representational art, film screens nonhuman nature as both revelation and concealment” (Pick & Narraway, 2022, p.2). Finally, *Spoor* uses the world of animals in order to cast moral judgement on the characters. As a result, the animals are, as Jonathan Burt calls them, “rhetorical animals”, while the “treatment of the animal body becomes a barometer for the moral health of the nation” (Burt, 2004, p. 31, 36). Although *Spoor* attempts to search for cinematic devices that would interrogate this ambivalent relationship between human and non-human, it eventually advocates for traditionally understood animal rights.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The characters inhabiting the fictional reality of *Spoor* are presented as either good or bad. The former are represented by the protagonist Duszejko and her friends: her neighbor Matoga, the Czech entomologist Boros, the epilepsy suffering IT specialist and translator of William Blake’s poetry, Dyzio (Jakub Gierszał), and “Dobra Nowina (Good News)” (Patrycja Wolny), a saleswoman in the local secondhand shop who is sexually exploited by the local businessman, Wnętrzak (Borys Szyc). With their life choices, specifically their rejection of the hegemonic model of heteronormative family as well as their eco-friendly lifestyles, they reject the patriarchal order.⁷ Their lifestyles locate them on the margins of the local community which is controlled by the negative characters of the local male establishment. The most important difference between these two cohorts is

⁷ It is worth of mentioning that Duszejko is a vegetarian which is important insofar as it is often associated with feminism, as both women and animals are victims of patriarchy; see Adams and Donovan, 1995.

their attitude to animals. While Duszejko and her friends protect them, the men engage in their brutal killing that they justify as a long-lasting (national) tradition. In Holland's film, the attitude to animals serves as a litmus test for the moral standing of the individuals as well as the communities they belong to.

Holland - who in the 1970s contributed to the Cinema of Moral Concern, a group of politically engaged films critical of the Polish reality of late socialism - has always been willing to comment on current affairs, but recently her public appearances have become more frequent and radical. She has vehemently criticized the Law and Justice (PiS) right-wing party that came to power in 2015 and the institution of the Roman-Catholic Church. In an interview given following the premiere of *Spoor*, Holland calls the latter a sect that has abandoned its Christian mission (Holland, January 29, 2017). She claims that the Church participates in the oppressive structures of power exercised by the PiS political authorities. The language she uses is often figurative (for example, calling the Catholic church a religious sect) and employs affective structures (various negative adjectives that express her emotional response to the church and its actions). In her public statements, Holland openly expresses her indignation; as Stefania Lucamante claims, indignation is "one of the so-called social passions" that can be

a catalyst for authorial intentions and can shape an artist's individual response to events through an aesthetic act of reflection on events that have wronged those who compose the very fabric of his or her community [...] the culmination of indignation towards injustice [expresses] righteous anger.

(Lucamante, 2020, p. 3)

I contend that the excessively negative characterization of male characters in *Spoor* representing patriarchal power evokes the authorial affect of “righteous anger”.

In *Spoor*, the scenes and episodes depicting the oppressive nature of the patriarchal system of power and its alliance with the Roman-Catholic Church employ stylized mise-en-scène and cinematography to present their participants as repulsive characters. They are repugnant in how they look and in what they say and do. They often don hunters’ uniforms that make their bodies stiff, while their small, ill-fitted hats make them look somehow grotesque. Their faces are red and sweaty, or unnaturally pale and zombie-like. Their voices are hoarse and loud. They are illuminated with harsh lighting that makes their faces look sharp-angled and gruesome. The local businessman Wnętrzak sexually exploits “Dobra Nowina” and he abuses foxes at his farm. The mayor of the town, Wolski (Andrzej Grabowski) is vulgar in his speech, and he mistreats his wife. All the powerful men are ruthless towards both women and animals. Duszejko is the only one who reproaches their behavior. When she witnesses this oppressive and repugnant system at work, she responds to it with an intense affect that is perceived by others as symptomatic of her psychological and emotional unbalance (cf. Nowak-McNeice, 2021). Importantly, in these scenes and episodes, the cinematic form breaks with the codes of cinematic realism and transparency, as if being an aesthetic equivalent to the affective intensity presented within the world of cinematic fiction. These ruptures of cinematic form, for example, discontinuity editing and chaotic camera movement, can be seen as Holland’s authorial signature. She uses visual excess to amplify the negative aspects of the characters that usurp political power, to which the protagonist responds with anger.

This negative coding can clearly be seen in the characterisation of the priest Szelest (Marcin Bosak). During his first encounter with Duszejko, their ideological conflict is presented through dialogue. (Fig.3)



Fig. 3 *Spoor* –Duszejko’s conversation with the priest

When Duszejko talks of the pain caused by losing her dogs, whom she calls her family, the priest accuses her of blasphemy and explains that animals are soulless creatures and as such cannot be redeemed. When Duszejko argues that killing animals is against the Ten Commandments, he responds that the commandments apply to human beings exclusively. Their dispute is filmed in a standard way: it begins with a master-shot and then is broken up into a shot-reverse shot sequence, with more medium close-ups of Duszejko to facilitate the viewers’ alignment with her character. However, as the scene develops, it loses its spatio-temporal clarity. As Robert Birkholm notes: “Non-standard

editing (...), creates the impression of spatiotemporal incoherence and confuses the viewer. Disorganized, fragmented space becomes a symbolic representation of the lack of a common (discursive) ground between interlocutors” (Birkholc, 2022). The most radical rupture of stylistic transparency occurs with an extreme close-up of the priest’s lips when he says: “God made animals subject to man”.



Fig. 4 *Spoor* – the extreme close-up of the priest’s mouth

Birkholc sees this shot as an example of radical realism that conveys a specific ideological discourse:

This naturalistic shot exposes the corporeality of the man – shown from such a close perspective, his moustache and beard may resemble animal hair (...). Stylistic devices undermine the assumptions of the Church on the ontic

difference between man and animals and suggest that religious “truths” are justified only within the framework of the discourse which constructs them. (Birkholc, 2022)

I would argue that the magnified image of the priest’s pink fleshy lips surrounded by facial hair represent visual excess rather than naturalism. On the one hand, it might be ascribed to Duszejko’s subjective perspective (see: Pisters, 2020, p. 179), yet not in terms of her optical point of view but rather affective response to the priest’s insensitivity to animals’ fate. On the other hand, the shot’s enhanced haptic aspect foregrounds the fleshiness of his lips as if testifying to them being organic matter that links them to the world of nature and animals rather than sublime spirituality. As Mary Ann Doane notes, “The scale of the close-up transforms the face into an instance of the gigantic, the monstrous: it overwhelms” (Doane, 2003, p. 94). When Doane uses the word “monstrous” she implies, whether intentionally or not, an affective aspect: the viewer responds to monstrous objects not only emotionally but also bodily. Gilles Deleuze addresses this complexity: “the close-up is by itself face and both are affect, affection image” (Deleuze, 1986, p. 88). Unlike most of the standard film vocabulary and film theory, Sergei Eisenstein does not use the term “close-up” but “large scale” or “large shot” which, according to Doane “is the very possibility cinema has of representing disproportion, of interrogating and displacing realism, that opens up a space for political critique” (Doane, 2003, p. 106). The “large shot” of the priest’s mouth breaks with the standard code of cinematic realism and its gigantic scale transforms it into the monstrous mouth of a moloch-like figure, as seen, for example, in *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914) or *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927). This cinematic image, then, does not represent

intersubjective reality but rather evokes an affective response to it. Figuratively, it represents how monstrous, *ergo* inhuman, the priest's attitude to animals is.⁸ The semiotic meaning of the image is erased and replaced with the affective, which opens up space for political critique and disagreement. Duszejko's behavior can be linked to the model of "agonistic pluralism", as conceptualized by Chantal Mouffe, which "asserts that the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions [...] in the public sphere. It is, rather, to attempt to mobilize those passions toward democratic designs" (Mouffe, 2009, p. 324). The monstrous image of the priest in *Spoor* can be seen as corresponding to Holland's anger towards the Roman-Catholic Church in Polish society, as expressed in her public statements.

The character of the priest is presented as a part of the local political establishment. In the hunting sequence, he wears hunting clothes and looks the same as his fellow hunters, who represent local authorities and business elites. When Duszejko frantically tries to stop them from shooting animals, one man grabs her violently (Fig. 5), whereas the priest delivers the most derisive remark: "She is off her rocker."

⁸ Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice interprets the scene in a similar vein: "The extreme close-ups of mouth and eyes turn the human characters into nonhumans, estrange them, and blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman animals [...] suggesting a monstrosity that does not apply to nonhuman characters" (Nowak-McNeice, 2021, p. 173). However, Nowak-McNeice overlooks that the extreme close-ups are not used to depict all the characters, thus it does not erase the difference between human and nonhuman.



Fig. 5 *Spoor* – Duszejko abused by the hunter

Instead of supporting the weak and tormented woman, the priest sticks to the strong and powerful. Furthermore, his comment does not express “objective” disagreement with her actions but instead evokes his contempt and disrespect towards the woman. The negative affect associated with him in the previous scene is now reinforced, his monstrosity even more pronounced. He is next shown in the church conducting the ceremony of naming the local school after St. Hubert, the patron of hunting. The priest stands at the elevated pulpit which spatially parallels the hunting pulpits featured in the film’s opening. When filmed from a low-angle saying “Hunters are God’s ambassadors to His creation”, his overwhelming presence dominates over the gathered worshipers who silently accept this act of appropriation of religion for political purposes. Only Duszejko responds to his words with a “righteous anger”, shouting at him to get down from the pulpit. Disjunctive editing and a distorted soundtrack rapidly break with the previously employed codes of

cinematic realism. These formal devices express Duszejko's disorientation and shock at seeing a wild boar's cadaver at the altar above which the boys' choir sings. (Fig.6)



Fig. 6 *Spoor* - a wild boar's cadaver at the altar

The ceremony is a bloody ritualistic performance rather than a Christian service.⁹ In the church scene, there are two competing spectacles: the one at the altar and the other of Duszejko's protest. Due to the stylized choreography of her movements and the camera work, her protest appears as a symbolic call for the Roman-Catholic Church, or perhaps the human species, to "get down" from their usurped top position over the whole world of nature. The affective intensity of cinematic form used to present Duszejko's anger at the priest's usurpation of power can be seen as evoking Holland's own anger and by extension moral judgement of the political situation in contemporary Poland that also implies moral judgement. According to Philip Fisher "Anger in its ethical form requires us to think about expected, predictable actions in a series" (Fisher, 2023). The cinematic expression of anger in *Spoor* can be seen as a performative act; the film has the potential to mobilize in viewers first an affective and then intellectual response, and finally a relevant action in the future.

The excessively negative portrayal of the hunters and the Catholic priest in *Spoor* also expresses an affective critique of Polish national mythology. Hunting has a special place in Polish collective imaginary, owing to its iconic representation in the national poem *Mr. Tadeusz* (*Pan Tadeusz*, 1834) by Adam Mickiewicz. Its protagonist, Father Robak, is a Catholic monk, who embodies the redemptive Romantic hero figure. Coincidentally, he is

⁹ Importantly, Duszejko's hostility towards the Catholic Church does not originate from a materialist worldview. It is the opposite rather, as she practices astrology and frequently expresses her belief in spiritual connectivity between all creatures. She represents what is today identified as post-secular spirituality that is extended to non-human existence as well. Her rejection of institutionalized religion appears as a necessary condition to participate in the "non-human turn" and embrace the principle of equity between human existence and any other form of organic life.

also the most skilled hunter. Andrzej Wajda nostalgically revives the figure of the heroic monk and attendant national myths in his 1999 adaptation of the poem. *Spoor*, intentionally or not, destroys the myth. The negative character of the priest-hunter denounces the pact between the Catholic Church and patriarchal authority but also deconstructs the core of the national culture as epitomized by Mickiewicz's work and its filmic adaptation. In Holland's film, instead of the tragic hero of the priest-hunter consecrated in Mickiewicz's poem and Wajda's film, we see the Catholic priest as supporting and contributing to the oppressive patriarchal system. He is a petty collaborator and supporter of those who are in power, while subduing those who reside at the margins of society. The film's subversive work has been noted by Amy Taubin, who reported:

When *Spoor* premiered at the 2017 Berlin Film Festival, where it won a Silver Bear (the Alfred Bauer prize), a correspondent for Poland's state media outlet wrote that Holland "had made a pagan film promoting ecoterrorism." She and Tokarczuk had already been branded *targowiczanie*, the vernacular Polish term for traitor. (Taubin, 2018, 52)

The film peeks beneath the surface of national imagery and shows its hidden oppressive aspects by means of narrative and visual excess.

In *Spoor*, all the hunters eventually die as if symbolically marking an annihilation of oppressive patriarchal power, though arguably the priest's death, in a church fire, is most overtly symbolic. As he is an antagonist and the church is a space usurped by secular power, the fire can be seen as a supernatural punishing force and a ritualistic act of

cleansing. Even if viewers later learn that Duszejko has entitled herself to punish the hunters, they will most likely see it as an act of poetic justice rather than her usurpation of supernatural power. As Taubin wrote in her review: “I cheered their deaths. They deserved no better” (Taubin, 2018, p. 52) testifying to the potential for an affective response to Duszejko’s act of justice. Duszejko’s actions do not originate from calculated pragmatic reasoning but are motivated by an affective response to the violent exploitation of the natural world. According to Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice she is a “non-normative rebel attempting to dismantle [...] the patriarchal, carnist social structures which shape the perception of cultural norms” (Nowak-McNeice, 2021, p. 175). However, she can also be considered as an “emotional activist” (Brown Kramer, 2009). As the protagonist, Duszejko is at the center of the emotional structure of the narrative and as such has the potential to mobilize viewers’ alignment to this fictional world and eventually trigger a critical response to it.

Spoor supports the ecological movement and rejects any form of hegemonic power; however it does not significantly subvert the relationship between human and non-human worlds. Instead, the film offers an affective familiarization of animals. It requires from the viewer affective empathy for the world of nature, while calling for ecological activism. Yet, it also ideologically appropriates animals – not unlike Hollywood cinema – to educate and promote the attitude of naïve realism, to borrow from David Ingram (2000, p. 71). While not participating in the “non-human” turn, *Spoor* can be linked to the “emotional turn”, in that it expresses the author’s affective response to the political realities of contemporary Poland, especially its unshaken patriarchal power that subordinates the social margins and remains indifferent to ecological issues. The film,

belonging to the realm of cultural production that operates within the affective, offers a new form of “emotional activism” as opposed to its erstwhile form based on an inter-subjective political agenda and relevant actions.

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