Summary

FEERIA.
The Wealth of Literary and Cinematic Connections of Speculative Fiction Art

Feeria. The Wealth of Literary and Cinematic Connections of Speculative Fiction Art is a book devoted to the global phenomenon of speculative fiction in the last few decades, and especially to its literary and film aspects. In keeping with the title, the themes and motifs are not in fully chronological order. What counts rather is a certain synchronicity within which their richness and diversity can be presented. It is the context that matters most: the gradual transformation, visible in this area of art, of the modernist cultural paradigm into the postmodern, expressed as the long duration of the former and having more similarities than differences with its successor. The key theme of the publication – the relationship between these two fields of art – is presented in essays and studies touching on various strands related to this issue. Among them, the issue of film adaptation of the texts of important speculative fiction writers has been singled out as particularly important. This coexistence of both art forms is probably most visible and not only in recent decades. The parallel existence of literature and film, including, of course, the variant of horror fantasy, fairy tale, fantasy and science fiction, is beyond any doubt. In the book, we find texts on this subject grouped in the first part, which is entitled simply *On film adaptation*, in its opening chapter – *To the stars and back. Stanisław Lem's works on screen*.

Lem's work is presented as being resistant to adaptation: it is no mean feat to transfer it to the big or small screen. This is due to its profoundly discursive, erudite and often essayistic style, which permeates Lem's narrative texts from the field of philosophical, journalistic and essayistic reflections. Film-makers either simplified his visions, rendering them too declarative and illustrative on screen, as was the case with the adaptations of novels that grew out of the experience of socialist realism, which resulted in the films *The Silent Star* and *Voyage to the end of the world* (*Ikaria XB-1*), or directors departed significantly from the letter and spirit of the original, as Andrei Tarkovsky did with *Solaris*, creatively betraying the original written a decade earlier. Paradoxically, those directors who opted for a self-restrained approach often came out unscathed from a potential clash with the writer's work, especially in the psychological and emotional layer of their adaptation. This was the case with Andrzej Wajda's *Roly Poly* (*Przekładaniec*), Edward Żebrowski's *Hospital of the Transfiguration* (*Szpital Przemienienia*) and Marek Piestrak's *The Investigation* (*Śledztwo*). The most original are the adaptations from recent years, which approached the writer's prose

more freely, unfettered by the corset of fear of the greatness of this Polish writer; the short film *Maska*, directed by the Quay Brothers, which, like the original story, focuses on the ontology of artificial, thinking beings; Ari Folman's *The Congress*, which uses animation and live-action film to show real-virtual relations; and finally, the grotesque *His Master's Voice*, by György Pálfi, the Hungarian master of this aesthetic form. These adaptations idiosyncratically but faithfully follow the employed used by Lem, proving that it is sufficient to stick consistently to one's own artistic vision and the adaptation effect can be satisfactory, expressing the inspiring power of the writing, which also allows for postmodern playing with form, style and expression.

The second chapter of this part of the book deals with adaptations of the prose by the American writer, Philip K. Dick. The momentous themes of his work correspond with, and to a great extent, anticipate what is happening in contemporary culture, the media, and politics. With the abundance of such problems, film-makers are eager to take them up: the disintegration of reality, its artificiality, manipulation of society and interference in private life, suspicion towards the surrounding world, the existence of demiurges controlling us, the relation between the real and the artificial or, finally, the surge in universal paranoia. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, which first drew the film world's interest to Dick's work, used most of these themes in an interesting manner. What he offered was an all-encompassing vision of the not-too-distant future, in which social stratification brings the gurus of artificial intelligence technology to the top. As a pioneer of posthumanism, Dick found interesting continuators and heirs, not only Scott, but also in the form of the Korean film-maker Byung-chun Min and his *Natural City*, Paul Verhoeven in *Total Recall* and Steven Spielberg in *Minority Report*. Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* features a paranoid vision of the world, in which a law enforcement officer resembles a drug addict or a thief, at the same time losing his grip on reality and allowing himself to impose the identity of an ill person or a slave, is in turn a feature of the production technique used – rotoscopy, which gives the effect of a split reality. This efffect was passionately described by Dick in many of his works, reaching the heights of artistry precisely in his original novel, later adapted for this film.

The last chapter in this part takes a look at the work of J.R.R. Tolkien through the prism of the film adaptations of his two works describing the world of fictional Middle-earth – *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Peter Jackson created two film trilogies connected by time, setting, characters, visuals and specific aesthetics, strictly resulting from his earlier works, and what is more interesting, not at all dissimilar to the world presented by Tolkien. The aesthetics of the grotesque and horror in Tolkien's works may have been hidden under a layer of the convention – a mythical story, a knightly tale, an allegorical image of a battle between Good and Evil or various forms of fairy-tale, but these patterns and frameworks do not negate the way the protagonists were depicted: sometimes grotesque and flashy, then clumsy and funny, crude and good-natured. Tolkien was able to depict evil personae so vividly that Jackson had no need to look for any additional aesthetic key. He had it not only thanks to the writer, but also to his own research at the beginning of his work. This stemmed largely from his youthful fascination with horror films, both those of the 1930s and 1940s and the counterculture work of H.G. Lewis and George Romero, which broke moral and aesthetic taboos. Out of this tradition came Jackson's films such as *Braindead* or *Bad*

Taste, in which the hideous, the ugly and the menacing are conflated with the funny, the clumsy and the intentionally tacky. It is this style that this New Zealand director and scriptwriter draws on most, bringing anxiety, horror, and also carnivalesque fairness and grotesque to Tolkien's mood of myth and dream.

The second part of *Feeria* is devoted to the traditional 'eternal' themes of speculative fiction, as its title proclaims. Its first chapter concerns the war between worlds, which Herbert George Wells dealt with in his novel. The chapter is by no means a simple tracing of the screen versions of this work; the theme served as a means for film-makers to talk about the condition of the world they live in, the nature of civilization on Earth, which, though usually advanced in its own estimation, reveals its flaws when confronted by an extraterrestrial civilization. What matters are the questions that the film-makers have taken up: How do we cope with danger and fear? How does the psychology of the crowd function in these circumstances? Where is the space for faith in God and faith in technological progress? How do we behave in the face of total war, calculated to annihilate the whole of humanity? In an era of conflict between the Western world, free and open, and the Eastern world, communist and enslaved, the answer was sought by Byron Haskin, who in creating his version of Wells' novel and telling it in a serious tone, searched for salvation for the characters, and not as in the original, in the grace of God. Several decades later, Steven Spielberg paid direct tribute to Wells in his adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*, which ultimately rendered the film unoriginal. Not much later, Roland Emmerich and especially Tim Burton went the way of disarming the threat with comedy. The former, in his *Independence Day*, referred to the conventions of disaster and war movies, but in such a way that the programmed Hollywood gung-ho patriotism contained in them was tempered with laughter and tongue-in-cheek distance. With *Mars Attacks* Burton went even further in this respect, leaving no hackneyed formula uncriticised.

The second chapter in this section reflects on the zombie in contemporary cinema and culture. The figure has a long and rich tradition. From romantic on-screen stories referring to the magic of Haitian voodoo, such as the 1930s and 1940s films *White Zombie* or *I Walked with a Zombie*, through controversial films by George Romero, mainly targeted at the consumerist philosophy, forming a cycle which began with *Night of the Living Dead*, to the recent works expressing posthumanist philosophy and new materialism, such as *Fido*, *Warm Bodies*, or *The Girl with all the Gifts*. Biologically, ethically and ontologically indeterminate creatures still arouse fear in us, parodying humans, forcing us to look into their faces as if into a mirror in which we see the worst possible kind of immortality. According to the assumptions of the aforementioned theory, which testify to a paradigm shift in culture, these questions and problems may be unfounded. The equalization of all beings in the post-anthropocentric era will enable us to coexist with non-human forms of existence, monstrous, imperfect, but also ones that become part of our (future?) everyday life. The living dead of recent films rebuild a society after a apocalypse of a greater or lesser scale, in which our place and shape may not be the same as before. In this way, monstrous beings are symbolically tamed and accepted.

The third text in this part of *Feeria* deals with screen nightmares straddling the border between horror and science fiction. Opening with general reflections on the close relationship between film and dreams, it largely analyses surrealist and expres-

sionist tropes in contemporary cinema. Both these avant-garde trends in art have left their mark on artists who believe more in images than in the on-screen representation of reality. The former include, for example, Roman Polański. By referring to his horror *Rosemary's Baby*, I am in fact indicating a sequence of intertextual relations leading to the continuation of his imagination, in which the oneiric and surreal means of depiction is used to tell a story about a mental nightmare of women lost in her imaginary and/or real traumas, which transcends the borders of reality. This is what Polanski's heir, Darren Aronofsky, does in *Mother!* But there are, after all, still active great masters of "nightmare art", namely David Lynch and David Cronenberg. The former is all about surrealism, both in his debut *Eraserhead* and in his deconstruction of the Hollywood myth, *Lost Highway*. In his work, Kafka is fused with black crime fiction, and everyday life is transformed by day into night-time terrors that change our identity and even physicality, replacing us with doubles. Cronenberg, on the other hand, transforms reality into a virtual world in which, once you accept its rules, you sense you are playing a game in which the beautiful and the nightmarish exist alongside each other, so closely in fact that you can hardly reject them any more, but agree to the dual status of being in a (quasi) world. I offer a separate discussion of Lars von Trier, whose "European Trilogy" combines anti-utopia with self-reflection on the hypnotic effect of film images, thus often treating the audience to horrors they would never experience in their conscious life. Finally, an exposed place in the construction of storied nightmares on screen is occupied in this group by the Wachowski sisters' *The Matrix*, no longer a thriller or a horror film, but "pure" science fiction, ultimately retelling the nightmare of a totalitarian state created by a rebellious artificial intelligence.

In the third part of the book, we find texts devoted to fantastic motifs from Jewish culture in film. Three key motifs are discussed: the golem, the dybbuk and, the most controversial in this context, the Holocaust, presented in the form of a fairy tale. The cinema depiction of the golem is not just another adaptation of Gustav Meyrink's 1915 novel. It is true that Paul Wegener and Carl Boese referred to the novel in their 1920 film version, as did Piotr Szulkin in his 1979 picture. But when extracting the key features of individual, authorial directing practices from the various screen versions of this figure, as in the case of the films of the "brotherly" film pairs, America's Coen brothers or the Paz brothers from Israel, it is worth bearing in mind a broader phenomenon that is analysed here. It is a question of the desire to compete with the divine act of creation which is performed firstly by the protagonists of these films, and secondly, in a metaphorical sense, by the artists who create worlds offering an alternative to reality.

The second chapter of this section focuses on the image of the dybbuk, a restless spirit haunting the new owner of the body that will serve as a vessel after death. The discussion here spans the Jewish legend and Polish nightmare, stemming from the incomplete settlement of wartime accounts of the dependencies and wrongs in Jewish-Polish relations. In this way, the dybbuk appears not merely as a figure from horror cinema and/or as the metaphysical and psychological presence of the transcendent, or at least of what is "on the other side", but also as a symbolic figure of an unresolved area of trauma, still affecting both Polish society and the Jewish diasporas scattered

around the world, who remember all too well the events of the times that brought about the Holocaust.

The third chapter focuses on fairy tale cinema retellings of the Holocaust, predominantly reflections on three films: *Schindler's List* by Steven Spielberg, *Life is Beautiful* by Roberto Benigni and *Pornography* by Jan Jakub Kolski. The problem here is the departure from attempts to present the Holocaust experience in realistic terms in favour of a fairy-tale poetics, which are essentially ahistorical. The films represent genre hybrids, combining drama, war movies and a fairy tale for adults, and contradict the views that dictate that this subject should be discussed only in a decorum style. An ethical imperative collides with an aesthetic convention with almost ludic qualities and functions. The clash of genres and styles results in a poetics that presents both the variant nature of the Holocaust story and a constant desire not to trivialise the subject, but at the same time, to speak in one's own language, in the author's own idiom rather than a collective, imposed one.

The last part of *Feeria,* that is *No Escape from Speculative Fiction?,* concerns artists who employ the conventions of speculative fiction in order to expand their own area of artistic experience. First of all, it concerns the work of Ingmar Bergman, a film-maker who did not avoid allegories, parables, fairy tales and horror. These were not, however, an end in themselves, but a costume that allowed him to use various genres to test the presence of metaphysics in the world in which human relationships, purely existential, were only seemingly important. However, this Swedish master was not certain about this. Hence his quest, which was based on the experiences of expressionism and symbolism, and resulted in films that varied in terms of genre: the fairy-tale *The Seventh Seal* from the beginning of his career and *Fanny and Alexander* as his final magnum opus, through horror cinema reaching back to gothicism, such as *The Magician*, *Hour of the Wolf* or *The Serpent's Egg*, and finally, the almost fairy-tale like *The Devil's Eye*. Behind these conventions often lay a form of morality play – Bergman eagerly referred to this medieval formula associated with unrealistic convention.

At the opposite pole we have the work of Juliusz Machulski. He employs speculative fiction as a mask to talk about social and moral issues and not, as most commentators believe, because it is his favourite artistic convention. His films of fantastic provenance such as *Sexmission*, *Kingsajz* (which are both anti-utopias), *How Much Does a Trojan Horse Weigh?*, *AmbaSSada* (science fiction using a time travel motif) and *Lullaby* (exploring vampiric horror) all concern the frailties of Polish society. In the first two cases, the director renders the stories universal, viewing them through the imposed theme of the existence of a totalitarian state, while in the next two he presents a homegrown history, which in the case of the first film is less tragic, and more so in the second. Finally, in *Lullaby*, he sketches out the shape of the new Polish reality after 1989 from the perspective of the familiar and, at the same time, threatening provinces. Machulski plays with and juggles genres like a true postmodernist, while at the same time presenting a picture of Polish customs in which we are supposed to see ourselves.

Even more different is the work of the eminent Czech director Jan Svěrák. He has made only one feature-length science fiction film, *Accumulator 1*, which is discussed here, and brings together the features of his work and highlights them through the speculative fiction form. Drawing on the rich tradition of Czech speculative fiction in

both its literary and film versions, Svěrák focuses, as always, on the joys and miseries of the safe, bourgeois lifestyle. He treats them satirically, showing the destructive influence of television on individuals' lives and on society. Consumption of goods, unthinking living, getting entangled in absurd schemes – all this deepens our contact with this particular mass medium. The director uses paradoxes, reaching for the anti-utopia formula merged with a form of mild grotesque.

The case of Svěrák's film provides a succinct illustration of the main thesis of *Feeria*, which refers to cinema's recent dependence of various features, forms and artistic strategies on the abundant, basically unlimited conventions of speculative fiction art. It proves to be a simple and, at the same time, flexible unifying factor, the background, and often the essence of a story about the world whose transformations can be described by means of this form of art, and not only its possible future versions. In this way, speculative fiction annexes our reality, renders it more fictionalised and returns it to us in a more interesting and richer version than the initial one.

Translated by Rob Pagett