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***Horror vacui*, the fear of empty space:  
Enacting a post-socialist village as a response to social changes**

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

The work is an inquiry into ways of comprehending village life, in order to analyse how these perceptions influence village inhabitants' social identity. I am interested in how the local rural community performs and makes sense of the narratives that relate to their own position today – in the aftermath of Communism. The focus is on the difficulties and discontinuities between these concepts and direct experiences. I illustrate and theorize the ambiguities inherent in my interlocutors' narratives, showing how these narratives merge to embody a coherent and linear identity. My main mode of representation is a documentary film, which brings out the corporeality of the place, providing a non-textual look at the problem.

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*Place is not some romance of a pre-given collective identity or of the eternity of the hills.*

Doreen Massey

*Silence poured into my ears in that village. The type of silence that takes its origin from the absence of domestic animals and people.*

Michał Książek

*If I was to design a crest for Eastern Europe, I would place dusk in one of its fields, and emptiness in the other. The first one as a sign of its uncertainty, the second of the still untamed landscape.*

Andrzej Stasiuk

## Research objectives and post-socialist background

The ethnographic fieldwork for this dissertation was conducted in a village called Przyborów, situated in the Beskid Mountains<sup>1</sup> in southern Poland, part of Carpathians. The study indirectly refers to the recent political transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. This transition from a centrally planned economy and one-party government to a market economy and parliamentary democracy is symbolized by the year 1989. That period may still serve as a reference-point for current social interpretations, as the transformation has had a long effect, turning not only the economy upside down, but multiple other social relations too (see, for example, Berdahl, Bunzl and Lampland 2003; Buchowski 1996, 2012; Burawoy and Verdery 1999). Thus, it is impossible to ignore the transformation and to examine contemporary Poland without reference to the concept of post-socialism.

The early discussions about post-socialism were dominated by the notion of the transition, resulting in “the expanding field that has come to be called ‘transitology’” (Berdahl 2003:2). As some observed, “the present heavy concentration – amounting almost to an obsession – on ‘the transition’ in this region will have to give way to a broader spectrum of topics” (Parkin 1997:218). Indeed, the anthropological perspective has since addressed a broader spectrum of topics than transition (Khittel 2004). Anthropologists have concluded that, due to the vast spatial and temporal scale involved, if there was “a plurality of socialisms” (Hann 1993), there must be also a plurality of post-socialisms.

However, the concept of post-socialism has generated a specific discourse, involving perspectives that are often incompatible with the phenomena that occur within the post-socialist realm today. For example, images of trauma, crisis and uncertainty (Borzęcka 1997; Buchowski 2016; Kamieńska 1993; Morawska 2010) have gradually become features of a discourse that we may call ‘post-socialist melancholy’ (cf. Said 2003). This orientalisng discourse misses the fact that, while the political system in Eastern and Central Europe has remained the same, the circumstances have often changed markedly (Buchowski 2006). Not only have new concerns emerged, but some phenomena have also become less important. For example, the period 1989-2004 in Poland was different from

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<sup>1</sup> The term Beskid Mountains (*Beskidy*) is commonly used to refer to several different sub-ranges within the Western Carpathians. In my research, I use the term to apply to one specific geographical region called Żywiec Beskids (*Beskid Żywiecki*).

later years, when Poland's access to the European Union altered the social context. The transformational shock and related issues that constitute 'post-socialist melancholy' already occupy much less space in social consciousness, and have been replaced by different concerns (i.e. post-access phenomena).

This orientalising discourse can grow into a 'self-orientalising' one. Rakowski (2016:142) describes contemporary village inhabitants' strategies of building a social identity based on "reactions of withdrawal, an escape to a 'different world' or creation of specific 'withdrawal rituals'". He claims that these socially accepted expressions of self-degradation "are all the ritualized practices of 'moaning' and resignation" (ibid.). But instead of treating these practices as definite forms of resignation, Rakowski proposes to look at them as negative, but still active, responses to changes. Self-victimization would be a discourse, not only a description. Rakowski's approach is an attempt to re-read the concept of post-socialism, suggesting a revision of its notion of a 'realm of inertia'.

My perspective is close to Rakowski's, although I faced another problem. Although I was prepared to base my research on 'withdrawal rituals', they seemed to be virtually absent. I rarely encountered situations where strategies for building social identity were based on unequivocally negative attitudes towards the current socio-economic situation.<sup>2</sup> However, 'withdrawal rituals' finally emerged, especially when *elicited* through research questions and, especially, the presence of a video camera. I thus claim that although rural dwellers in peripheral areas of Poland have largely been relieved from the impact of the transformational shock, their narratives are still saturated with a sense of insatiable loss. Although strategies of building social identity are no longer solely based on 'withdrawal rituals', the 'post-socialist melancholy' discourse appears anyway as a way of expression. Accordingly, the central argument of my dissertation is that the perceptions which make up social identity in Przyborów, while seemingly conflicting, coexist and form meaning.

In analysing these strategies, I extend the term *enactment* employed in *Mobility and Place: Enacting Northern European Peripheries* (Baerenholdt 2008), where it is used mainly in the context of constructing place:

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<sup>2</sup> My fieldwork was more than a decade after Rakowski's and conducted in a different social context.



Places may be enacted through their roles as arenas where people are likely to meet. [...] Places are not construed out of nowhere but involve materialities, politics and imaginations, comprising people's engagement with their physical-material environment. Practices of place enactment thus directly involve nature, politics of nature and imaginations of nature. (Baerenholdt 2008:2-3)

Enacting a post-socialist village involves making sense of the connections between the politics of place, the imaginations of place, and people's engagements with place (cf. Basso; Feld 1998). Consequently, enactment generates tensions between people's desires and what is materially possible. The filming process was an attempt to show those tensions.

### **Rural locality**

In Przyborów, conversations slip easily into topics related to a local space that is often perceived in a dissected way. Idyllic descriptions of country life are combined with those emphasizing its debilitating hard labour and poverty. Stories that express a sense of nostalgia are juxtaposed with those of the claustrophobic local community. The emotions in these narratives take the village as either a desired or an unwanted entity. This was articulated by Stefania, one of the film protagonists, in the final scene. Sitting on the bench, feeling the approach of autumn, Stefania talks about the need to leave her village house and return to the city.

I would be sorry to leave here, because my parents were here, brother... I was raised here. They're watching over me here for sure. That's why I like it here. It draws me. I can't wait for spring. Run away and come back here. It's fine there too. It's comfortable. In the winter, warm. Well, but I'm drawn here, I like being here.

This is the place where good memories of her youth are located. But in the winter here it would be hard for a lonely old woman to survive, so she leaves for the comfort of the city. The reason appears to be the weather conditions, but moments earlier, Stefania also talks about the local people, about their mutual hatred and violence, which she believes lurks beneath the surface of the apparently peaceful community. She does not want her grandchildren to live in the village. She found suggestions to live here and commute to the nearby town unconvincing. Such opinions are common. This village is perceived as a

residential place for retired people, rather than a final destination for those still professionally active. Nevertheless, the place is not forgotten by those who were born here. As in Stefania's ambiguous talk, it raises mixed emotions and attracts mixed responses. They do not stem only from the aesthetics or practical features of the landscape. Instead, they are connected to the overall sense of the place. Those feelings emerge from the relationship between the notions of the village as, on the one hand, inferior to the urban realm and, on the other, as an idyll.

The fundamental contradictions in the perceptions of the village and the city form one of the most important axes in Polish society (Myśliwski 2003; Stomma 2002). Examining how this opposition is presented in language explains why it conveys mixed emotions. The very word 'peasant' (*chłop*) is an archaic and mildly pejorative term. I have never heard this word used by permanent inhabitants of Przyborów to describe themselves. Virtually all other semantic variants of this term – *wieśniak*, *wsiok*, *cham*, *kmiot*, *kmiotek*, *parobek*, *plebs*, *bamber* – are considered archaic or offensive. *Rolnik* (farmer), the least emotionally charged expression, is used in popular and scholarly discourse to signify a person who produces food. Its meaning is narrower than 'peasant', who can live in the countryside without necessarily being a farmer. In fact, most Przyborów inhabitants today do not produce food, and, if they do, it is only small quantities for self-consumption. This may be why the word *rolnik* does not serve as a term to describe one's identity and is seldom used in everyday speech. There is also a term *włościanin*, which is used only in the historical context, where it is connected to a highly romanticized image of the village. Finally, *gospodarz* designates a farm manager, but is rarely used now since there is almost no agricultural production any more.

Another term that is used is *góral* and *góralka* ('highlander', masculine and feminine), which is sometimes used in conversations to refer to oneself, regardless of occupation or class. It broadly signifies an inhabitant of mountainous regions (*góra* means 'mountain') and is used all over the Polish-speaking Carpathians. It can also signify an ethnic group (*górale żywieccy* – Żywiec Highlanders), and as such is used predominantly in scholarly discourse. Thirdly, despite its broader meaning, it can also be used to refer to specific local groups of people, which is the application I encountered most. It simply designates 'us'. One instance when this meaning emerged was the arrival of a group of

carpenters who had come to work in Przyborów from a mountainous region located some 100km away. They were also referred to as *góral*, but there was no affinity expressed whatsoever. They were viewed as strangers, and their short stay in Przyborów was marked by xenophobic behaviour. Therefore, there are hardly any single terms to describe Przyborów's inhabitants that are at the same time comprehensive and that would be used by themselves.

Despite the lack of suitable terms to describe Przyborów inhabitants' social identity, the group is bound together by a category that can be called locality. Expressions most strongly related to social identity are those conveying the sense of place. Being 'from here' defines the person first and foremost. During our introductions, we would first locate ourselves, before moving on to more abstract issues. This often involved gestures, like pointing towards referenced places. Once, when talking about the history of the highlanders, somebody pointed and told me where they came from originally: "the Balkans". On another occasion, the interlocutor pointed out the place where the legendary first household in the area was located. Stefania frequently indicated places we would then talk about. Even the most distant places in her narratives, such as England, were to some extent materialized by those directional gestures. Therefore, the notion of locality conveys an internal, ephemeral and unsanctioned sense of identity. It is utilized by those involved in it. Its uniqueness might be why this sense of identity based on locality is so highly valued, and why it can bind the community so strongly.<sup>3</sup>

If locality is a mode of identity, then attachment to the land is its defining feature. For generations, the main mode of dwelling within the landscape, which determined all of its aspects, was agriculture. One's future depended on land, so the notion of identity and well-being unsurprisingly revolves around this issue. The social history of the micro-region of my fieldwork is an arena of many radical disturbances, including expulsion or mass migration (both internal and external), but it appears not to have altered the sense of identity exhibited by local inhabitants. I was reminded several times that their focus is always on those things that are nearest: the local community and concrete land. After every change imposed on their way of life, the inhabitants of this area seem to return to the

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<sup>3</sup> However, due to its subtle character, the local sense of belonging was also prone to transformation and inaccuracy.

simple principle of attachment to land as their most important objective. This is why the land was a topic I found to be willingly discussed. My conversations were therefore well *grounded*, as most of my interviews related to it. The land, in turn, in a hermeneutic circle, binds local people and strengthens their notion of being a localized community. Therefore, the identity-locality nexus intuitively acquires land and rural characteristics, becoming an indivisible singular entity: to be considered a fully-fledged permanent inhabitant, one must be a local who owns the land and knows it through years of direct physical involvement.

While the main mode of social identity is rural locality, it is necessary to emphasize we have to point out that it does not occur in a fixed state, but requires negotiation. The process of self-reflection as a villager in Przyborów involves various aspects, the most important of which is constituted by the rural-urban axis. This division is very much abstract, but nevertheless propels social interactions. The situation of ethnographic fieldwork and the presence of a video camera enhanced this need for self-constitution and the enactment of the rural locality.

### **Templates: Ways of looking at village life**

Robotycki and Węglarz (1983) suggest that the Polish humanities have constructed their research object by observing it through the lens of 'folk culture' (*kultura ludowa*). This construct embodies a conviction about a particular role for the peasantry. According to this paradigm:

Folk culture is a source of authenticity; it contains particular ethical values; it has a 'rational kernel' [...] at the same time, it retains the type of internal organization that participating in it contributes to the harmonious development of personality (as opposed to the destructive influence of civilization). (Robotycki and Węglarz 1983:4)

This construct produces features that Sulima (1982, cited in Robotycki and Węglarz 1983:4) calls "figures of thought", which exemplify mythical language. These figures of thought:

[...] create a homogeneous and transparent, aesthetically distinct visions of the whole world and history [...] Figures of thought are the signs and symbols embodied in the ideological dialogue; they are carriers of ideology and behave differently in altered historical situations. (Robotycki and Węglarz 1983:4).

Following Robotycki and Węglarz, we can find examples of the mythification of folk culture in the Polish humanities. It is particularly evident in analyses of 'folk art'. Whether architecture, painting or poetry, 'folk art' has been characterized by simplicity of style, authenticity and lack of 'foreign infestations'. Folklore was supposed to be a "panacea for the threat of civilization" (Robotycki and Węglarz 1983:5). Dominated by reason and rationalism, the peasant, focusing always on physical work and sheer survival, could not afford to act in 'irrational' or obscure ways (cf. with films: Karabasz 1977; Ślesicki 1966; Ślesicki 1970; Zygałto 1982). In the Polish humanities, this way of thinking about the village has also been apparent in the constant conformity of theory with ethnographic data (Czaja and Robotycki 1986:152). An anthropological "feedback loop" occurred (cf. Latour and Woolgar 1986), whereby data perpetuates the theory, and theory explains the data. The image of the village as an 'authentic source of the nation' became an axiom in the 20th century (see, for example, Biernacka 1981, Dobrowolski 1958, Moszyński 1968, Pigoń 1974, Pawluczuk 1978, Grabowski 1976).

The idealization of the village is not the only manifestation of the mythical role assigned to the peasantry. Against the positive image of the 'traditional peasant' there is a pejorative portrait based on the notion of 'backwardness', whereby the peasant is seen as isolated from the outside world. There is often also a fatalistic temporal element, with the village figuring as a chaotic place in a state of transformation and soon to disappear. This temporal rationality does not originate within the village but outside. According to such an image, changes in the countryside are unavoidable, and the 'idle peasant' will be replaced by the 'thinking villager' (cf. Halamska 2006).

This mythical language of the village is not limited to academia. Indeed, "Literature has been the motherland of the functioning and transformation of the ideas of the village" (Sulima 1982:75). It manifests itself in culture as an endlessly reproduced cliché (Czaja and Robotycki 1986). A peasant figure can be used as a general description of the principles governing society, so the descriptive process expresses certain values. This is where 'folk

culture' becomes an essential element of the 'post-socialist melancholy' discourse. The disappearing folk culture mirrors and overlaps with the notion of post-socialism as a 'realm of loss'.

The same figures may exist beyond scholarly and literary discourses in the form of reflection, as people react to and engage with them. Through literature, science and art, scenarios of thinking about the countryside can reach back to the place from which they originated. This 'exchange of stereotypes', according to Sulima (1982), occurs at different levels, which are more or less consciously perceived, analysed and intertwined in the narratives of the village itself.

### **Research methods**

I have applied a phenomenological approach to describe Przyborów inhabitants' perceptions of the village, to elicit how the experiences of living in a Polish village took form in their lives. These perceptions are the primary analytical material which is necessary for examining people's approaches towards the changing realities of the place; they can also help us understand their conceptualisations of the place. As Ram and Houston (2015:1-2) propose:

Phenomenology in anthropology is a theory of perception and experience [...] to show how experience and perception are constituted through social and practical engagements. [...] Its method is in fact predicated on this quest to reveal and discard whatever is revealed to be an unwarranted presupposition smuggled into one's work.

Strikingly, this research method can reveal moments where 'experiences' coincide with presuppositions, and 'perception' is mediated by 'conception'. This allows examination of how direct experiential understandings are embedded in non-experiential elements such as social imageries. Phenomenological *lifeworlds* are considered 'open' entities prone to changes, rather than enclosed structures of human subjectivities (Casey 1996; Jackson 1996). Through them, relations between 'experiences' and 'concepts' are constantly reconciled.

I argue that Przyborów inhabitants' direct experiential understandings of the post-socialist village are still largely embedded in, and shaped by, non-experiential concepts aligned to a particular discourse of 'post-socialist melancholy'. Therefore, focusing on experience – expressed in gestures, movements and senses – does not preclude insight into the influence on some ethnographic interactions of “discursive formations that shape and reshape what we take to be experience” (Ram and Houston 2015:4). More or less consciously, we enacted one of the most prominent discursive formations: the post-socialist 'withdrawal rituals'. I deliberately use the word 'we' because I consider that the dialectic process of enactment occurred not only between the interlocutors themselves, but also between the ethnographer and the interlocutors.

According to Jackson (1996:2), “The phenomenological method [...] is an attempt to describe human consciousness in its lived immediacy, before it is subject to theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematizing.” But can this intention be fulfilled? Is it not that conceptualisations are inscribed into all efforts to understand and describe experience? We should, I would argue, read Jackson's statement with an emphasis on the word 'attempt'. In fact, the whole phenomenological method does not create a false opposition between 'experience' and 'concept'. Casey's theory may be taken as an example:

Casey [...] uses a striking phrase to describe the way in which social institutions and cultural practices permeate our sensing bodies: they 'become infusions into the infra-structure of perception itself'. Such 'impersonal' determinants are, in fact, constitutive elements of 'personal' experience, but as background, forming the horizons of ordinary perception that are not part of the conscious domain. *Thus the crucial conceptual role played by 'horizons' or 'background' must be properly integrated into our account of experience.* For with it comes the entry of other places and times, invisible and in the past, into experience, bringing a quality of porosity to the concept. Not only does the present open up to the past, but the method is opened up to differences in individuals' and groups' visions, auditions, tastes [...] We call up, like a conjurer, those elements that might support us in our projects. But only some elements of these impersonal determinants may be supportive – others, if inappropriate, will be non-supportive, and fall into disuse or simply hold back either the individual or collective agency of an entire social group.

We can therefore speak not only of the particularity of experiences, and their diverse social constitution, but of less supportive horizons, backgrounds, or environments that retard individual's or classes' efficacy in accomplishing tasks or projects. (Ram and Houston 2015:10; my emphasis)

The role of the 'infusions into the infra-structure of perception itself' is the central subject of this research. The experiences of living in a Polish village, not only its descriptions, seem to me to have been mediated through various, not always compatible, imaginaries. I argue that our understanding and analysis of post-Communist life experiences will be enhanced by comparing the social imaginaries that stem from different narratives. Social imaginaries may be understood as the collective ideas which give sense to the life of the community:

By social imaginary I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (Taylor 2004:23)

Those ideas that sanction the 'world order', and give reality meaning, can be also called myths, and I use those terms interchangeably. A myth may be defined as "A construct that permits variable and conditional components of experience to be associated, in a targeted fashion, with unconditioned realities like 'being', 'truth', 'value', 'sense'" (Kotakowski 1972:7, cited in Robotycki and Węglarz 1983). Indeed, Barthes's (2009:131) notion that "myth is a type of speech [...] conveyed by a discourse" shows that myth is not an 'untrue' tale, but an essential form of language that determines our understanding.

The phenomenological descriptions of village life I have acquired, which focus on the diminishing role of labour and rapidly changing landscapes, would be difficult to understand without a broader contextualization. The post-socialist realm is diverse and full of internal contradictions. Therefore, in order to understand what images stand behind village culture today, what they mean, why some are desired while others are avoided, we must establish what the 'reference points' for those images are. We need to look at how



the village was perceived and described before, and how it was ‘constructed’. I thus look at some of the historical narratives produced by ethnographers, historians and peasants, as well as literary representations. This macro-perspective, which complements the phenomenological one, is crucial to understanding how the image of the village has changed, and how the contemporary social imaginary utilizes the remnants of historical narratives today. In brief, we need to inquire into the “reservoir of myths” used by post-socialist village dwellers to reorganize their lifeworlds today.

As stated above, to analyse those ‘myths’, comparisons are often made within a relatively narrow temporal scale: between contemporary phenomena and those from the previous political system, the Communist regime. This often leads to interpretations with too narrow a dialectical spectrum to be able to explain all the aspects of the phenomenon being analysed. For example, people’s relation to the decline of physical labour is often understood relative only to the work ethos of the People’s Republic of Poland. While this comparison facilitates intelligible interpretation, the narrow timescale precludes addressing all the issues that stem from it. It may not, for instance, show the ambiguous relation of peasants to labour before World War II, which still persists today to some extent. Therefore, a broader historical perspective was necessary in my research, so as to expand the aforementioned ‘reservoir of myths’. I thus propose to shift the temporal scale and to explore the idea of the Polish village not only during the Communist era but in the pre-1939 period as well. The advantage of this method is that it includes a crucial period which is overlooked in most social analysis in this context. The pre-1939 period is often referred to as a distant and, crucially, a ‘normal’ time, an era radically different from the turbulent time of the revolution of 1939-89.<sup>4</sup> I thus suggest that the pre-1939 period serves as a significant point of reference for contemporary Poles. Therefore, in order to understand rural identity in the aftermath of Communism, I also discuss this pre-Communist period.

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<sup>4</sup> I follow Leder (2014) in calling the 1939-1989 period a ‘revolution’.

## The use of visual methods

“Images cannot be ideas” (Lévi-Strauss 1962:20).

Inspired by this laconic sentence, I start with the assumption that film can provide a different perspective on a problem: a non-textual one. MacDougall (2006:1) writes:

Meaning guides our seeing. Meaning allows us to categorize objects. Meaning is what imbues the image [...] But meaning, *when we force it on things*, can also blind us, causing us to see only what we expect to see or distancing us from seeing very much at all. (MacDougall 2006:1, my emphasis).

Although MacDougall was referring to a literal film-image, whereas Lévi-Strauss was addressing a non-filmic context, these two statements overlap. Images, literal or imagined, can be approached in a non-textual, or even non-linguistic, manner. As MacDougall (2006:2) suggests, “By treating images – in paintings, photographs, and films – as a product of language, or even a language in themselves, we ally them to a concept of thought that neglects many of the ways in which they create our knowledge”. My visual mode of representation is based on the assumption that what a research method using film can do best is to focus on showing ‘being’ as it is enacted (cf. Geyrhalter 2011; Hanak 1972; Loznitsa 2000; Rivers 2012). I wanted to make a film that would explore the different ‘ways in which we create our knowledge’, prioritizing non-textual qualities over linguistic ones. The film can bring forth the corporeality and materiality of reality; it offers the first and somewhat non-textual look at the subject. Of course, such an approach does not necessarily imply an absence of explicit, verbally expressed meanings. Indeed, in my film, characters’ speech plays a significant role. I understand the non-textual quality of the film as a conscious refusal to *impose* specific interpretations on the viewer, rather than literal silence (cf. Klamt, Rydzewski 2004; Marczak 2010).

The film introduces an additional dimension to my research by taking an opposite approach to that in this text, which provides the interpretation and contextual information about the phenomenon under investigation. I see my film as a type of narrative that is less authoritative and less homogeneous in its descriptions of people’s views than my non-visual interpretations. The film does not need to duplicate the ability to explain, a feature of text. Documentary film has a right to speak from the ‘other position’; it need not conform

to verbally constructed language. At a basic level, film conveys perceptual or, in MacDougall's words, 'corporeal' values. But although film has non-textual and non-linguistic properties, which MacDougall ceases even to call a language, it is important to remember that it does form a specific language later, after the 'corporeal image' has been acquired and 'mixed' with the meanings given to it. With its specific language, it creates and uses countless metaphors, which should, in my opinion, be exploited. However, the effort to make a film that speaks through visual metaphors involves striving to create as 'open' and 'non-textual' composition as possible.

I see my film as a form of immediate description. I utilize its ability to show the materiality of space in its indescribable complexity, with innumerable details. This materiality is reinforced by another dimension: sound. However, this lack of reductionism in showing the world, this high capacity for indication, does not mean that film can automatically create directed narratives. The image itself has the power to create multiple narrative pathways, but it needs to be complemented, for example by other images, to narrow this spectrum. I attempted to make each image tell the same story, but from a slightly different angle. I thus narrowed the interpretative perspective and presented my own view on the issue. But at the same time, through specific ways of filming and editing (framing, rhythm or camera movements), I tried to leave the viewer space for their own interpretation. Ultimately, the filming method was mixed, both 'open' and 'narrow'. For example, although the film oscillates around the sense of an 'end' and explicit expressions of nostalgia, the viewer must make a significant effort to interpret these images, and try to answer the question of what these emotions stand for, because I purposefully do not contextualize those images individually.

Another methodological proposition is to create a specific form of narration, which would be based on dialogue between my characters and me as the creator (cf. Szumowska 2007; Zariczny 2010). Such dialogue, which often turns into improvisation, is used to make interaction possible in the directions proposed by my interlocutors. Such an approach, which can be termed phenomenological, allowed me to record events which could not be planned in advance. This polyphonic improvisation was supposed to 'break' the premises I made earlier. With its open, dialogical and improvisational attitude, the film follows the protagonists, but also shows, crucially, how they 'play the camera', how they decide what

to show and what not to show, how they present themselves, and how they construct their identity and the place where they live in the presence of the camera. The processes of active transformation of the protagonists' rural identity thus emerge indirectly, through non-explanatory visual description. Since I do not usually ask directly about any of my main research interests, the viewer is asked to watch the 'chaos' of apparently insignificant occurrences.

### **Stefania: The 'old worlds' come to life**

After arriving in Przyborów, my daily route led to the deserted hamlet 20 minutes' walk away. These walks did not have a specific purpose, except to talk with people I met along the way and to test the camera. The hamlet was unusual. There were empty wooden cottages that could no longer be found anywhere else nearby. I explored the interiors of these houses, imagining those who had previously lived there. I could sit on chairs where someone had doubtless sat in the evening after a hard day's work. I could touch and feel the texture of abandoned objects: glasses, cutlery, toolboxes, clothing. I could read documents scattered on the floor and left in drawers, electricity bills, medical cards, postcards. I could look at the pictures still on the walls. These naïve thoughts were my first impressions.

After a couple of somewhat flat days, I saw a lady sitting on a bench in front of her house. Her name was Stefania. The way she welcomed me and opened up to me was unexpected. So far, people were always willing to talk, but at the sight of the camera and notebook, they often retreated. Stefania, however, immediately agreed to an interview. Since I have visited the village for fifteen years, there was generally no need to introduce myself. Whenever I met a resident I did not know, two or three sentences were enough for an introduction. Usually, I gave the exact location of the house where I lived, and no other questions were asked. However, my presence as an ethnographer complicated matters, particularly when I had to explain why I was there. The first words that came to my mind in those moments were 'the changing landscape' or the 'anthropology of landscape'. But I was aware that such phrases were alien to local everyday language. Thus, over time I

adopted other key terms which seemed more relevant, like 'the overgrown fields' and 'the old life'. This sentence in Rapport's (1993) ethnography aptly captures the situation:

I was explaining myself as primarily interested in the social history of the dale – how local lives, ordinary not regal lives, had changed [...] – because having used the term 'anthropology' once or twice [...] and being received by a polite but alarmed silence, I realised that history was a far more recognised and potentially appropriate and acceptable subject. (Rapport 1993:56)

Usually, whenever I asked about 'the old life', I saw a flash in people's eyes, which made it easier for me to make contact with my interlocutor. In most cases I was not required to explain anything more about my research before being overwhelmed by the multitude of stories about *what I would like* to hear. In this way, conversations with Stefania focused upon retrospective memories.

Her description of the old *orbis interior*, the closest world, forms a triad made up of her parents' house, their fields and their cow. Stefania lives at the end of the village in a wooden house built by her father. "He built it and died shortly after," she said when we were sitting in her kitchen. After he died, Stefania and her siblings lived there with their mother, who frequently reappears in her stories. They were farming on a few patches of field. In those days, they sought to hold as much land as possible in large single plots and as close as possible to the house. They also had a patch of woodland and a cow. The animal ensured their survival and independence. Stony soil yielded little, mainly oats and potatoes, whereas a cow was a source of 'wealth': milk, butter and cheese. This small territory, within which a Beskid peasant used to live, was practically impossible to leave behind. One could not get away from the house or the animals, and neither was it necessary. Everything a person needed to make a living was readily available nearby; the necessary equipment could also be found in the market in the local town. It seems that, as Stefania recounts about her mother, people could not, and did not, want to go anywhere:

Her field, her house, her place. Never in her life would she be anywhere else! Because it was hers. No way, she wouldn't go anywhere. She liked to work here. While she was strong, she was young – she was working. And as she got sick, I took

her home, into town. But before she died she said she wished to die in her place, here! And so she did.

The lives of those from Stefania's mother's generation unfolded within a small area. It was saturated with known and used spaces, and today the neighbourhood is still full of its traces, on which she touches in her narratives. There are the paths, which are so overgrown that it is difficult to realise that people could once have used them on a daily basis. Cuts made on the bark of trees mark out property. Large piles of stones (*kępy*), now overgrown with bushes, were picked from the ground for years to clear the soil and make it into arable land. Finally, a few wooden houses, or their ruins, remain, slowly dissolving into the earth. Sometimes even an attentive eye cannot find them amidst the grass: foundation stones have been taken for other developments, and wooden walls are decayed or burned.

Stefania was kept busy for some time each day tending and protecting her flowers from roe deer and wild boars that would come to feed on them. Flowers were central to Stefania's village life, as animal breeding and farming were to her mother's:

Now it is overgrown, but once, as I remember, the grass was bitten to the ground, the cow would eat it all. Nobody here had flowers because they had to work in the field. It was a different life. Wild boars didn't dig as badly as now. We planted there in the field, she [Stefania's mother] planted, and I came to help her, to dig potatoes, to stack hay, to gather oats. I worked a lot. It was hard work.

Stefania continued talking. Throughout, it was a story about the end, about the collapse of her world.

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I suggested a walk to the hamlet. (As we were going out, I noticed a newspaper distributed by the Jehovah's Witnesses lying on the table. There were some catastrophic images of 'the end of the world' on its cover. I was surprised because I knew that Stefania was Catholic. She explained, "That's old! They visited me here one day, so I took it. But I didn't see them in the area for a long time.") If I had not discovered this place myself, I would probably not have heard about it from locals, as it did not appear in daily practice or conversations. Stefania had plenty of free time and accepted my offer willingly. The walk

involved seeing places where her friends used to live, whom she had not seen for years. The walk was also an opportunity for Stefania to show me the neighbourhood. Knowledge of topography and the history of the local places seemed to me to be an inherent attribute of the rural locality, so I wanted to film an ordinary walk, even if it lacked particular significance. As Rabinow (1977) writes:

Where a successful cultural form provides an ongoing framework for interpreting and generating experience, here the experience of the Other is most comprehensible. Boundaries are easily discernible, symbols are neatly situated, and sequence is explicitly controlled. [...] Yet it is in the less explicitly shaped and less overtly significant areas of day-to-day activity and common-sense reasoning that most cultural differences are embedded. [...] There are no clear boundaries to conclusively limit and define *cultural performance*. (Rabinow 1977:58, my emphasis)

An ordinary walk was not 'a successful cultural form', but nevertheless became significant. Stefania did not recognize the area and seemed to be lost. She told me that she did not normally have the opportunity to move further than a few dozen metres beyond her doorstep. She lived here for the warmest part of the year, but was brought here equipped with everything she needed, and thus had no reason to wander around. We walked without seeing anyone all day. We passed lonely houses and small clusters which had been converted into holiday cottages or abandoned. We would stop in front of each one, and Stefania would tell stories about them according to the same pattern: the names of the main inhabitants, the number of children and the number of cows. The stories were based on laboriously reconstituted fragments of memory.

Stefania's ordinary day was focused on her household. She would greet passers-by, but that was her main form of contact with the neighbourhood. Although she presented herself as a local, I later learned that she was perceived here almost as a stranger and did not participate in village life. She had not lived in the village permanently since the 1960s, when she moved with her family to an industrial city. She would only come back here in the summer to help her mother around the house. The fact she had left once somehow erased her from local life. From the way she presented the village for the camera, I assume that this rejection was not neutral. She was perceived as the least 'representative' person

(I was later told), but nevertheless took the challenge of showing me her world as if she was a fully-fledged local. Later, I found that her situation was not unusual. There were many similar 'local strangers' who were also in some way enacting an abstract imaginary of a lost idyll, and who struggled to merge the imaginary and politics of the place, and their physical engagements with it, into a single coherent social identity.

### **Henryk and Zofia: Challenging returns**

The initial idea behind the film was to create the impression of the action in all places being interconnected and occurring simultaneously, so as to seamlessly merge the different characters into a single plot; this is a method frequently used in documentary film (i.e. Aśliuk 2011; Frammartino 2010; Rosi 2016). Building a multidimensional narrative such as this required planning in advance in order to direct the scenes to overlap. However, given my limited time for filming and lack of a film crew, it proved impossible to follow this method. Instead of focusing on the internal dynamics of the micro-stories, I tried to rearrange them to fit them together, but after a few weeks of following this method, I realised that the unpredictability of the occurrences in each place constantly reshaped the intricate narrative plans. Therefore, I altered the method to suit a more open framework. I paid attention to each individual narrative, the main themes of which remained related and parallel to each other. Stefania became the narrator of the film, the person who guides us, and, although the film may seem to be a continuum, it consists of scenes shot at different times in different places.

One of those places was the household of Henryk and Zofia. Henryk is a retired coal miner and Zofia, his wife, a retired teacher. Like Stefania, they were born in this area before leaving in their early twenties to the neighbouring industrial region of Silesia in search of work. They spent their whole professional life there before settling here in Przyborów. Previously, they alternated between the village and the city, spending every day off work in the village. Nowadays they generally do not go anywhere; if they are not in their garden, they are most likely inside their big, concrete house, which towers over the whole village. As soon as the sun appeared over the mountains in the morning, Henryk would quietly walk around his garden to inspect what had happened overnight. Usually this was just another



molehill on the lawn, or a broken flower or twig, but sometimes he would find signs of a fox or a marten, which would inevitably irritate him. Most often he went straight to his pigeon coop. When I was up early enough, I would hear the cooing, the flapping wings and the sound of pigeons taking off to fly around the roofs in the cold morning air. Henryk's small flock was never up for long; they would soon land again in the garden to walk around and feed all day, almost like chickens. This morning spectacle was often the only occurrence during the day, after which, everything would go quiet.

Henryk and Zofia seemed to be confined to the small area of their household. Despite their apparent lack of mobility and their impression of being cut off from local matters, they had a good knowledge of village topics. However, I could not imagine their life stories – fragments of which they had told me over the years – as a film. I could not think how to narrativize them convincingly. This is a common problem for many visual anthropologists, as Barbash and Taylor (1997:35-36) warn:

Not all topics can be explored easily in film; or rather, not all ways of conceiving topics lend themselves to film. Although film is capable of abstraction, and its construction is usually complex, it's important to remember that it is a concrete, experiential medium. Part of the attraction of film is its affinity with life itself – the movement on the screen evoking the movement we ourselves experience outside the cinema, the seeing evoking our own seeing, and hearing evoking hearing.

But what if these subjects would lead to very little movement on the screen? What would be the best way to *visualize* a topic here? To generate ideas, I began by engaging in casual conversations which I did not film, where Henryk and Zofia mostly told me about their lifestyle, defined by a handful of close people and a few familiar places.

H: Listen, I have lived here my entire life and haven't been anywhere. Anywhere. Never on holidays, and never anywhere abroad.

Z: We don't suit that lifestyle.

H: I like resting here. I can look at the pigeons, feed the rabbits...

Z: At the beginning, when we came here [to build the house where they live now], it was only for a Saturday and a Sunday. And obviously, there was no time to even sit down and rest.

H: Construction and other things. There was no time to go anywhere else.

Z: And we've been doing so for the last 20 years.

After I had decided that I wanted to film, I explained the project to them and, before filming, I also offered to help them with some odd jobs around the house. Zofia gently but firmly refused to be filmed, so I continued my regular conversations with her and focused on filming Henryk. After our meetings became more regular, a good opportunity to film appeared. It had stopped raining, so Henryk could finally chop the wood which had been laying for a long time in a big pile near the house. When I heard the noise of an axe early in the morning, I took the camera and went to see him. I preferred to film the process itself instead of recording a conversation, as I was interested in showing the dynamics of this small place in a nonverbal image. However, as soon as he agreed to me filming, we started talking about different types of wood and their characteristics. And as we were speaking, the conversation quickly slipped into Henryk's monologue about the past. I realised later, during post-production, that this was one of those special moments when the filmed person decides the direction the scene will take. It is important to distinguish narratives which coincide with the main focus of the film from those that are interesting but do not add to the issue being researched. Henryk was talking about his hard work: "Here we were more exhausted than I was at the coal mine. I never worked so hard at the mine as I did here." There is no point duplicating the film and citing Henryk's words here: suffice it to say that his story was clear and straightforward, with land and labour as its central themes. There was no melancholy in his words: he did not long for a 'lost' past.

I kept coming back to visit Henryk and Zofia, but I never again managed to film anything that resembled Henryk's first self-presentation. For the next few days, I was left with an image of a satisfied family, who had found their well-deserved refuge here after years of hard work. As I talked to others in a similar situation (there were many families of former coal miners in the area), I looked at them through the same lens. This was until I had another conversation with Zofia.

Although Zofia continued to reject my suggestions to be filmed, she did share some thoughts with me. One day she was anxious, and told me about a phone call from a neighbour, who had accused her of stealing wood from his forest. Property boundaries are not clearly demarcated for the layman, and it is easy to overlook a pile of stones that may be a boundary or to miss the inconspicuous shallow trenches that divide the forest. Fields are generally unfenced; if they are fenced, the fence is usually made of simple rods. However, this certainly does not mean that there are no borders at all, or that they are blurred. On the contrary, disputes often arise about violations of property, usually theft of timber from someone else's forest. Even more frequent are negotiations about the possibility of passing through someone's field. When someone wants to sell a piece of land for the construction of a holiday cottage, the most common reason for buying land today, free access to the field becomes a primary issue. Unfortunately, the fragmentation of estates, which dates back to the 19th century, has made many plots unreachable from public roads. This necessitates negotiation, further division of plots, and is the main source of cross-border disputes. While, practically, the landscape remains open, with no real obstacles for trespassers, the existence of boundaries and private property is important to local people and forms a significant part of their conversations.

The conflict Zofia talked about was caused by poorly marked property borders. This case strikingly revealed yet another dimension to the village. After she had explained that particular dispute, we had several more conversations where Zofia told me about issues Henryk had not mentioned. The whole village, it turned out, was torn with conflict unseen by strangers, usually related to land (especially inheritance problems or right of access to plots), access to water, and a range of deep personal issues. Many of these conflicts have dragged on for years. Stefania had already brought some up before, but I was convinced that she had been exaggerating, and I had also, fearing that sharing rumours might bring new problems for her, asked her not to touch on those topics.

Thus, the vision of this village as a harmonious whole, as represented by Stefania and Henryk, became complicated. It was not that their credibility was in doubt; rather, their performative character had been emphasized. It seems plausible that it was the presence of the ethnographer and the dynamics of filmmaking that made my interlocutors enact the village in such a coherent way.

In any case, the image of the Beskid countryside in the second decade of the 21st century is not an image of fulfilled inhabitants enjoying a harmonious coexistence. It is instead a place full of internal tension, as the aspirations of its members do not differ substantially from those of other residents of the region, including those from cities. Their efforts are now mainly focused on securing financial status. If the united, stable village which was often presented in the stories had ever existed, it does not exist today.

### **Grzegorz: Restoring the old landscapes**

I could walk through my fieldwork site within two hours, and most places were very close to each other. Despite this proximity, I found residents did not use many of the old roads that connected them. I conducted my interviews in largely uninhabited, isolated places – ‘wildernesses’, as they were often called. In order to meet people and understand the spatial context in which they dwelt, I decided to traverse the area on foot, often moving through those unoccupied places. People would often say: “There is nothing there anymore”, or “Why are you walking there?” But I soon realised that I was *not*, in fact, wandering through any very remote or inaccessible terrains; they were only recently marginalized and somehow excluded from everyday experience. Although my research was conducted within a mountain massif, it should not be treated strictly in terms of its geography or geology, but rather in terms of how it appears to its inhabitants. This is a fragmented, heterogeneous conglomeration of places: habitable and used, or abandoned and unnecessary. In this sense, all those roads, paths, ‘wastelands’ and forests between the households seem like empty ‘wildernesses’ and can be treated as such.

One day, I walked towards the northern, darker and damper side of the mountain. I had only vague information about the person I hoped to talk to. I knew there was somebody on the other side of the mountain who had recently set up an unusual animal farm, for which reason he had been mentioned several times by my interviewees. I found Grzegorz, a busy 37-year-old man, surprisingly quickly, as he was eating lunch between working at the family bakery and tending his animals. He invited me into his home and introduced his mother, whom he was looking after (his father and brother had died recently within a short period). I also met his sister, who was living with her husband on the other

side of the road, and his uncle, Czesiek, who was living nearby (he later became another informant).

Grzegorz had bought a couple of Scottish Highland cattle, which grazed in mountain glades above the village. No one else in the area was interested in this kind of business, which was thus rather exotic. Previously, it was popular to keep one or two dairy cows, whose milk would be used for the household. By contrast, Highland cattle are kept for meat, which is relatively expensive and sold outside the vicinity rather than being consumed in the household. Grzegorz's enterprise thus seemed pioneering in the local context. Moreover, he had decided to set up this unusual cattle ranch despite having no one except his uncle to help.

After finishing our coffee, we got into the car, an old Soviet 4x4 GAZ, took some bags of unsold bread for the cattle, and set off for the pasture. Grzegorz's strategy in setting up his small cattle farm was simple. He does not own much land apart from a small plot inherited from his grandfather, which would not be sufficient to sustain his herd. Instead of Grzegorz buying more land, his neighbours allowed him to use theirs without payment, leaving him with a large pasture at his disposal. People rent it for free in exchange for it being worked, because it is more desirable for a field to be used, even by a stranger, than for it to be left fallow.

Grzegorz told me about these intricate familial and neighbourly property relationships when we were feeding the animals with the bread we brought. He also told me that his main concern was that the pasture he was using for the flock was running out of good grass. It would finish soon and he would have to lead the animals to other areas a little further away. The problem was that Scottish cattle are difficult to handle and are easily frightened, scattering themselves over the surrounding mountains, from where it is hard to bring them back. After a short time, we prepared to move the animals. It took us the first few days to fence four hectares of the new pasture area. Wooden poles were hammered into the ground and electric fencing was fitted. On the day of the herding, Grzegorz looked particularly nervous. His agitation was understandable, since this was the first time he was driving this number of animals over such a long distance. Several people, including family and friends, came from the surrounding villages. This small event aroused curiosity and people came willingly, without seeking payment. However, despite Grzegorz's

fears, everything went smoothly. Shortly afterwards, the flock was grazing on a pasture of fresh grass, he said: “They have the wealth here, right? They haven’t eaten that kind of grass yet!” This remark was followed by laughter.

That evening, Grzegorz organized a party. Late that night, after a whole roasted lamb had been eaten, a couple of bottles of vodka had been drunk, and the folk music<sup>5</sup> had finally been turned off, Grzegorz, clearly relaxed, announced: “It’s because of you, the ecologists! You’d like everything here to get wasted, to be overgrown. To get rid of people. But I want to restore the old landscapes!” He said this to the approval of all those gathered at the table. He appealed to the images rooted in the past, in which the village features as a solid neighbourhood structure based on shared work and close contacts, free from what bothered him most, the overgrown landscapes. However, his work seemed to conflict with this image. His cow breeding is a creative and courageous enterprise, which, in fact, contradicts the traditional way of living in the countryside. It is based on the actions of one person only, without close cooperation with others. It is modern, not traditional, farming. But none of my interviewees ever commented on this apparent contradiction. They hesitated to confront ways of thinking or methods of action. Consciously and publicly opposing such thinking results in ostracism, or, at best, aloofness. This is why it was apparent that many potential directions of growth were often inhibited by patterns provided by the past or by tradition.

That evening, a range of opinions were expressed about the current situation of the region. Many of the motifs I had heard during earlier conversations were mentioned, including a strong willingness to act and move things forward, but also a palpable nostalgia for the increasingly distant reality of the ‘old life’. In the most basic terms, this could be described as a longing for stability, order and prosperity. The atmosphere that evening was special, conducive to the development of visions of the future. There is probably nothing unique in this figurative thinking, as, according to Eliade (1998:14-15), “symbolic thinking is intrinsic to human existence, precedes discourse and discursive thought”, and “even the most primitive ‘longing’ conceals the ‘longing for paradise’” (ibid.:19). Eliade remarks that

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<sup>5</sup> The music was by Brathanki, a pop band which gained recognition in Poland in the 2000s. The lead singer, former anthropology student Halina Mlynkova, created music drawing from different places and styles, including traditional Polish Carpathian folk music.

such thinking, including important imagery of 'Earthly Paradise', never loses its relevance. Images and symbols are multi-layered, multi-valued structures that constantly undergo new transformations. Our imagination plays with, updates and repeats them. These images also have a 'loose relationship' with the reality to which they refer. Facts do not always matter. This vague connection between image and reality seems to mark imaginings of the old Beskid mountain village life as free of constraints and a Paradise on Earth.

### **Circulation of village and town imaginaries**

If we examine the wider picture and ask what it means to be a villager today, we will find a common narrative: the pressure imposed on the present-day countryside, which requires its rapid, wide-ranging modernization. As one of the leading Polish sociologists of the village articulates, "The basic indicators of being a pro- or anti-modernization farmer are attitudes and behaviours towards the market economy in general and attitudes and behaviour towards democracy" (Halamska 2006:5). This narrative is dominated by a paradigm of production, as the village is primarily supposed to be an economically viable production base. Although this is a rather narrow, restrictive vision, it seems that most village inhabitants subscribe to it. All the economic data suggests that this is the most likely path of development. This pressure to become a modern farmer requires more than just a break with the past of small, self-sufficient family farms by increasing crop acreage and ensuring profitability; it also requires openness, a break with rural isolationism, and moving beyond the xenophobic locality (Sowa 2011). In short, it requires a major change of mentality. Wasilewski, another sociologist of the village, outlined this point in an interview:

Dorota Wodecka (DW): Are we *chams* [an archaic expression used to describe a peasant; today it signifies someone very rude; clearly offensive or provocative]?

Jacek Wasilewski (JW): Mentally, sure, but not like 20 years ago. Today's society consists of the generations who are in touch with the village through grandparents, not parents. But that does not mean that their mentality has changed radically. It is impossible for this change to occur within one generation.

DW: Poles are usually outraged if someone says they are from the countryside.

JW: [To be a] peasant? Never!

DW: Our peasant mentality also manifests itself in public space. The single-family house of the 'Polish manor' type is a classic of the genre.

JW: An old manor house owner is a natural pattern for imitation, it is an expression of hidden longings to be like a landlord. What else can we appeal to?

DW: Poles are ashamed of their peasantry. Marian Pilot<sup>6</sup> claims that the fate of history makes the Polish nation today a nation of those who have 'broken through to the other side'. Haters of where they came from, and rejecting the past to become *sine patre, sine matre, sine genealogia* [no father, no mother, no genealogy].

JW: We uphold the myths which, on the one hand, give rise to a sense of superiority, and, on the other, to complexes. (Wodecka 2012)

This interview contains examples of issues discussed in debates about the peasant roots of Polish society across the media in 2012. During this discussion, it became clear that a phenomenon affecting a large part of society had not yet found its outlet: the widespread pursuit of 'rural emancipation', liberation from locality, isolation and the ongoing struggle for survival. It can be assumed that today most Poles are driven by the prevailing – and, paradoxically, largely overlooked – need to escape from the village heritage.

Looking at the history of the idea of 'rural emancipation', there is evidently no fundamental difference between the idea today and in the days of the Polish People's Republic (1945-89). In those days, the Polish village underwent a major metamorphosis, as peasants were, for the first time, politically empowered. They also became the largest beneficiary of the system and, at least theoretically,<sup>7</sup> its ideological foundation. Communist authorities ensured wide support from the village by granting economic privileges such as (relatively) fixed prices, guarantees for the purchase of agricultural products and

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<sup>6</sup> An essayist and writer, one of the most prominent representatives of the so-called 'peasant trend' in Polish literature.

<sup>7</sup> Political relations between the Communist government and the rural part of the working class were ambiguous. For example, the idea of collectivization, crucial for the authorities, was widely rejected by villagers.



agricultural subsidies (Rakowski 2016). From the perspective of the village, masses of people who survived the war went to cities to take part in the so-called 'grand socialist designs'. This was a large-scale transformation reconstructing the country from the ravages of war and from its modernization. Often, this was the first opportunity for the village inhabitants to leave their *orbis interior* permanently, and many of those new labourers saw that change as a significant social promotion (Leder 2014). Thanks to these new opportunities, Polish villages overcame the obstacle that had defined them for generations: isolation (Myśliwski 2003, Sroczyński 2012).

Going even further back, we can see one of the dominant narratives through which the village was perceived. An article from 1937 describes an area very close to Przyborów<sup>8</sup> before its inhabitants had left due to overpopulation and poverty:

They usually owned one or two morgens<sup>9</sup> of land, situated on stony barren slopes. Before the [First World] War, they were looking for bread everywhere. [...] They were talking about their hard, hopeless lives there, high in the mountains, where only cabbage soup and potatoes were available. They couldn't even think about getting bread. (Wiktor 1937)

Here, the main axis of development and aspiration is the movement between the village and another rural realm. This reveals the scale of change after 1945, when it became possible for the peasant to dream of moving to the city. In the case described in the article, the pinnacle of aspirations was to move to another better village. As Sulima (1982:114) puts it:

The village-city relationship may be considered a way of thinking about the dynamics of social and cultural diversity, experienced and lived directly. It is a direct experience of the processes of social dynamics. [...] In the 1930s, the dichotomy of the village-city was expressed in the idealization and mythification of the content of the contrasting poles, and the echoes of such a position are also found today [in the 1980s] not so much in social attitudes as in the anthropological conception of the village as the world 'primary innocence'. (Sulima 1982:114)

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<sup>8</sup> Głuchaczki, 3km from Przyborów.

<sup>9</sup> Approximately 0.5 hectares.

### ***Horror vacui***

We encountered the abandoned hamlet. I asked Stefania: “Did they help each other on a daily basis?” Without hesitation, she replied: “Yes! Everyone knew each other very well, they all visited each other.” This answer reinforced one of the images of this community, in which it is portrayed as a united entity. It was warm and sunny, and we peered into empty, decaying huts. Many possessions were left intact, as they were abandoned years ago. Only the metal parts of the furnaces have disappeared, probably taken for scrap. In some huts, floorboards had been pulled up, presumably in search of hidden ‘valuables’. We were walking from room to room, and Stefania kept talking. In her narratives, there was a nostalgia for the allegedly lost order: “It wasn’t overgrown here. There were many fields. They had cows, lots of cows. They were herding, they laboured. And today? Why did this happen? I’ll finish the same. If I’m not here, my cottage will look the same... Overgrown.”

Over the course of our acquaintance, her strategy became more explicit. Our conversations began to take on an unequivocal character, and its subjects and tone began to narrow. Stefania understood her ‘role’ more and more, and I also started to better understand what my own research was about. Rabinow (1977:38) describes the process of fieldwork as dialectical, where “highlighting, identifying and analysing [disturbs] usual patterns of experience”, and where the informant is “constantly being forced to reflect on his own activities and objectify them”. As a result, the informant and ethnographer create together a shared ground of experience and understanding, which is a rewarding process and is always the ethnographer’s goal. However, care should be taken to avoid producing a self-perpetuating, overly consistent and one-sided narrative. Now that I have gained the proper distance from my fieldwork, I can say that at the time of my conversations with Stefania, my desire to only hear certain narratives was strong, and perhaps obstructed other aspects that could have been investigated. Therefore, one possible approach to the topic of social identity in the Beskid Mountains might be to seek to transcend the ‘post-socialist melancholy’ discourse and focus on the subtle new imaginaries that emerge there.

Stefania’s strategy was to relish the idea of a harmonious whole that is disappearing. She once took part in the unprecedented event of the widespread emigration to cities. When mass industry, which was the main support for those internal migrants, lost

its momentum, the city and modernity rejected these people. Those who have returned to the countryside often have no desire or ability to adapt. They have settled on principles which resemble those of their parents but which collide with the new realities. From their perspective, the future can only be filled with images of the past. As Stefania once told me: "It will be the end of this world."

Henryk and Zofia implement a strategy that seems much more balanced. Although their life-stories appear similar to Stefania's, they differ in their approach to the present and future. They have made an effort to create a place which is a safe haven after years of hard work. However, the imagery of their familiar places collides with an alien and hostile reality. Moreover, the idea of the village as a residential place did not meet their expectations.

Finally, there is a strategy that adopts polarized visions, idealizing the old countryside while acting in the spirit of modernity. Grzegorz struggles with the inevitable modernization processes that are blocked by sentimental fantasies.

In fact, in all of these cases, we face the Lacanian Real being blocked by fantasies. In the gap between the Real and fantasies, a drama appears – the lack of continuity, an empty space filled with narratives. The empty space could be also read as the lack of political subjectivity, which village inhabitants have been experiencing for centuries, and which they are seeking to overcome today. Finally, empty space can also be understood more literally, as the absence of the 'old landscapes', which are disappearing under the pressure of 'wilderness encroachment'. This is a paradoxical emptiness because it is the result of an excess of new forms.

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