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**Transgressions: film recordings of the isolation period.
Media studies analysis of short films inspired by the pandemic
(HBO project)****Introduction: A scattered world. Research topics and methodology**

The contemporary artist's response to the fears is crossing the framework of traditional communication. The pandemic and the isolation linked to it force the authors to search for a new language that would once again justify their presence in the world. They need to answer who they are and redefine a new kind of mission within art. The only way is to try to get used to the pandemic reality by actively exploring it, close to transgressive experiences. The term, which appeared in the field of psychological and social sciences in the 1930s and then successfully took over the area of art, accurately describes the attitudes of artists who perceive isolation as a chance to create a new, innovative, also for themselves, image of reality. The creators reject observation as a kind of cognition. They saturate their works with visual symbols of rebellion and escape. They depart from acceptance in order to creatively redefine the concepts that once marked the continuity of their experiences and artistic achievements. The world is no longer a safe space to be accepted. In order to find themselves in it, they need new forms of expression and language, and crossing barriers is a symbol of survival and activity for them. The artists equate beauty with truth, although experiencing the latter can sometimes be an escape from transcendence into the realms of carnality. This in turn acquires the dimension of a painful feeling of the world. The creators are no longer aesthetes. They explore areas that used to be of no cognitive value for them. They build their visions from scraps and bits of reality, they reject the Aristotelian laws and order in favour of destruction as for them the beauty has a demon's face and continuity is an obstacle in the story. The young filmmakers participating in the international project of the HBO digital platform, entitled *At Home*, surprise with mature stories that shed new light on a man in times of plague, obsessed and passionate about surviving at any cost, and this is associated primarily with learning about his limitations so that he could transcend them in the process of rebirth. Transgressive actions lead to the release of new imaging. The world falls into tiny pieces that need to be illuminated separately. The bits of the whole take on new meanings only in isolation. Each event is analyzed in one context – a lack of freedom. Their value is measured in progressive decay,

erosion and dispersion. The transgression of the filmmakers invited to participate in the project is therefore not based on merging the fragments of reality to give it a new meaning, but in the oppressive observation of the segments of the world that ceased to exist in a known and accessible form. Freedom has replaced isolation. Freedom – a rebellion that bears the hallmarks of contesting everything, except for the belief that the world viewed through the glass is different, not meaning worse and less interesting. The window limits the field of vision but allows the one to focus on the details. Only those, properly exposed and revised, have the power to revive art in its new dimension that is limited for some but innovative and fascinating for others.

The theme of isolation, and thus rebellion and dispersion, in the face of the limitations of creative freedom, allows us to examine the theories of French semiologists. Their research places the analysis of films in the context of the broadly understood text. As Bruno Ollivier writes in his dissertation entitled *Communication Sciences*: “[...] semiotic approaches allow us to deal with signs and codes that go beyond the linguistic phenomena themselves. Anything can carry some meaning”. (Ollivier 2010: 84)

The French researcher, invoking Roland Barthes’ theory, revises the text. He indicates a change in perspectives: from a linguistic, which focuses on words and sentences, to a textual one. The aforementioned Barthes justifies: “[...] the aim is to separate analytical concepts that are considered a priori general enough from linguistics in order to help initiate a semiological study”. (Barthes 2008: 95)

It should therefore be assumed that the film is a carrier of signs and codes, since the meanings it carries go far beyond the linguistic dimension of the reality (its segments) under study.

Therefore, it can be assumed that analyzing films as texts will significantly expand the scope of the research and observations. According to Charles Sanders Peirce, the signs can be considered in two ways, and the formation of meaning (semiosis) is carried out on the basis of a triangular pattern. The sign cannot be analyzed in isolation from reality, but in relation to what it changes in the world. Barthes suggests that researchers, e.g. of films, audio-visual programmes, conduct experiments:

[...] a part of reality that carries the meaning is separated, broken down into parts and then put back together. This work of deconstruction and reconstruction makes it possible to understand how the meaning functions in this part of reality. It makes reality understandable. (Barthes 2008: 67)

Umberto Eco claims that reading images (also the moving ones, i.e. the shots that make up the film) is part of the cultural competence/receiving activity. Christian Metz, a French linguist, systematizes the process of making sense in the film, proving that:

[...] a reflection that would be based on the works of great theorists, on the works of film studies and the achievements of linguists could implement a beautiful project of researching the mechanisms by which people pass on human meanings in human societies. (Metz 1971: 34)

The process of semiological image study is, however, hampered by the phenomena of analogy, identification and diegesia (stories). The viewer, watching moving pictures, identifies with them, having the impression that they are a faithful reflection of reality. He forgets about cropping processes, camera angles and its fields of view. Consequently, what he watches is a processed message that is subjected to encoding. Identification is equally complicated. The viewer considers the camera's field of view to be the only correct one, and therefore fundamentally false. It is not a reliable image, as it has been processed, for example, by the personality and talent of the cinematographer. Finally, most frequently the viewer identifies himself with the characters of the story. Lina Aronson calls it protagonist bonding. Aristotle in his *Poetics* contrasted imitation with storytelling. Metz understands a story as a fictional world, first built in the mind of the creator and then restructured in the recipient's brain in the process of decoding meanings and senses. In this analysis of films, I will try to show the process of encoding the presented reality, which as a consequence appears either as a sequence of random sequences (dispersion) or builds new meanings on the basis of negation, which completely prevents the process of identification with the creator and his message. In the works under discussion, the individualism appears as a rule organizing mainly emotions. The meanings escape unambiguous analyses and generalizations. It is a sign of the times when freedom is a state of fatigue with the excess of new, unintelligible incentives that should be systematized. The decoding of the signs has become impossible. And searching for the meaning is unnecessary. It is a new, unexplored state of decay. That is, the reverse of the processes that semiologists study and describe. The creators stop at the stage of deconstruction. They do not relocate accents, so they do not fold reality to give it new meanings. They stop halfway. These are interesting insights that change the communication process in practice. This situation may be explained by the reversed transgression. Not towards *me*, but away from *myself*.

Transgression as a creative attitude

In this part of the discussion, it is necessary to recall the ideas of two researchers who devoted a large part of their scientific achievements to transgression. Georg Simmel aptly points out that every human being, at any point in life, is in the space *in between*. This reality, which is difficult to define, and for understandable reasons, is different for each of us, is marked by borders. It is therefore a natural human tendency to exceed them. The borders, according to the German philosopher:

[...] define [...] the formal structure of our being, which is filled in its various peripheries, activities and fates with a different content each time. [...] Every content of life, such as a feeling, an experience, an action or a thought, has a certain intensity and colour, a specific quantum and a position in a certain order. (Simmel 1975: 45)

However, Simmel clearly emphasizes that each of us, being aware of the existence of some limitations, naturally strives to exceed them, especially in the situations that threaten them in any way. Transgression appears in the considerations of the German researcher as a kind of self-awareness and escape from dangers.

Therefore, if our life is stretched between the boundaries, crossing them is an innate and natural tendency of every individual who is aware of his existence. It is crucial, however, whether this process takes place voluntarily or is imposed by external circumstances, independent of us and our perception of the world (isolation). Our reactions are also important: from the passive acceptance of borders, to rebellion and crossing them, in which the philosopher sees both the development of the man and the world. Any kind of transgression is a form of both growing towards and away from yourself. According to the researcher, a man who is aware of limitations strives to overcome them, thus expanding the limits of his own cognition and experiencing feelings unavailable to others. Simmel perceives the existence of limits as the sense of human experiencing the world:

[...] The existence of the border as such is necessary, but every particular border can be crossed at the same time, every arrangement is shifted, every barrier is burst; the act of crossing sets a new border each time. (Simmel 1975: 25)

Each shift of the border creates new limitations. On the one hand, faith in human capabilities inspires optimism, on the other, it provokes reflection and fills us with fear, because living in this form is a continuous journey stretched between limitations that, for one's own development, one should constantly overcome. Not everyone feels such a need. For some, transgressions are fearful. They are a source of frustration. The German philosopher emphasizes that it is experienced by artists who, in the process of crossing borders, find the sense of their artistic functioning in the world. Art arises from their fears and oppressions. Simmel's observations should be supplemented by the theories of Józef Koźmielecki, who rightly notices that transgression is a natural human tendency, although it manifests itself in different ways and with a different intensity of needs and sensations. (Koźmielecki 1976: 45) Koźmielecki extends the research on human psychological activity with a rather sad conclusion. He notes that scientists focus on the transgression of outstanding individuals. However, it is proper and assigned to everyone. We are only different in the manner of its manifestation and form. On the one hand, the researcher sees a genetic tendency in it, on the other, elements of upbringing and individual habits. To conclude: transgression is inherent in human nature, although not all of us are aware of the risks it carries.

Transgression in pandemic movies

Crossing the borders towards *one's own self* is considered one of the most important human rights. It directly touches upon its development and unrestricted artistic expansion, which is manifested in works that contest reality. I suggest to consider a few short films, which were selected from the anthology of 14 works produced by Polish directors, cinematographers and screenwriters commissioned by HBO (Jacek Borcuch, Andrzej Dragan, Krzysztof Garbaczewski, Renata Gąsiorowska, Magnus von Horn, Paweł Łoziński, Jan P. Matuszyński, Tomek Popakul, Jerzy Skolimowski, Krzysztof Skonieczny, Małgorzata Szumowska/Michał Englert, Mariusz Trelński, Anna Zamecka/Sung Rae Cho and Xawery Żuławski). They were created during the

first wave of the pandemic, when mass isolation became an unwanted, forced and contested by all form of functioning. The movies are personal stories about experiencing creative dilemmas in times of plague. They primarily affect the fundamental rights of each of us. Limitation of civil liberties can be a severe form of enslavement. In the symbolic sense, it most affects those who made freedom their strength and communication, i.e. communication on the level of artistic experiments. Each of the creators expresses the painful process of searching for the truth and asks whether works that are usually born in full freedom can arise in isolation. The rule of the etudes discussed is the change in the distribution of the accents of the story. Different perspectives and varieties of film language seem to be the most interesting. As it was already noted, it has decayed into particles that are illuminated only on one side. This means that the authors of the etudes look at fragments of reality. Collageism is a method that seems to best capture the essence of enslavement which in fact was an isolation for the creators. The details took on more importance than the whole. Each of them was treated as a separate chapter. Every one carried conflict and emotions. The reflection on communication – verbal and non-verbal, becomes an important part of the considerations on contemporary cinema, inspired by a pandemic. Not less important is the question of the identity of the creators. In isolation, did they remain faithful to their artistic quest, or did the process of transgression enrich their personality? Or maybe the changes imposed by the restrictions have impoverished the cinematic view of the world? Finally, have the authors who bravely joined the social discourse before the pandemic been pushed to the margins of the periphery? Maybe their voice has lost its power and clarity or recognition?

Textual analysis of films

The most important observations that will introduce the reader to the world of textual analysis of the suggested films relate to the research of semiologists. Let us assume that the cinematographic work is a unit of discourse – realized and concretized:

[...] and the system corresponding to the text is an ideal object, constructed by the analyser, it is a special combination of codes, based on logic and relations specific to a given text [...] and the code, although constituting a system, is not a textual system, but a more general one. (Aumont, Marie 2013: 134)

As understood by Roland Barthes, codes are, in fact, vast sets (fields) of connotations that facilitate reading the meanings. The researcher specifies that their number is not closed, which allows for a multitude of interpretations.

I analyze 5 out of 14 short films about the pandemic. They share a theme but have different styles of film narration and references to various film genres, although all of them can be classified as personal statements by authors who thoughtfully rejected linear storytelling in favour of text segmentation (transgression).

Małgorzata Szumowska and Michał Englert, whom the pandemic imprisoned in Masuria, perversely titled their film: *A Boy with a View*. The first look at the work suggests that their work is an etude. The action has been reduced to a minimum and

is limited to showing, in virtually every shot (segment), the activity of a boy who traverses an undefined space with glass. He watches the world through it. Not at home, but outdoors.

The glass is an attribute and symbol of limitation. On the one hand, the frames suggest the boundlessness, on the other, the filmmakers force the protagonist into frames defined by a narrow view. The traditional narrative is broken, leading to a decay, i.e. a summary of the protagonist's actions. All the efforts of the creators are focused on proving that the world seen behind the glass is different. In the film by Szumowska and Englert, a symbolic imprisonment touches the essence of humanity, that is, an overwhelming desire to know and understand what we are seeing at a given moment. The glass keeps the one from getting close to the trees, water, clouds, and even the shadow cast by the boy's feet. The world seen through the window can be distorted, but still real, because it allows you to see a fragment of reality. Through one element, seemingly insignificant and peripheral, we can, if experience allows us, get to know the whole. However, one must put some effort into this process and put together the window frames on the axis of symbolic time. The boy tries to do it, but he lacks strength and determination. After a while, he leaves, resigned. Szumowska and Englert clearly signal that their protagonist is trapped. He will never manage to cross the border because he does not know that he must not let go at all costs. In this sense, he remains lost. The drama of the etude stems from the inability to fully recognise, although the open and loose composition of the film gives hope to overcome limitations – in the post-pandemic time. Waiting is a trap, and acting is a danger. In such apparent suspension and stagnation, the ideas of drama are born.

In a short film entitled *A Song about the End of the World*, Andrzej Dragan spreads the piece of the world available to him on two time plans. The first one, set in the reality of the railway station, is a space of fear. The passenger, waiting for the train, watches the prophetic actor – the demiurge – on the screen of his mobile phone. This is an undefined figure from an unknown reality. Dragan shows that the clash of two codes: the tangible reality of fear and the space that eludes any analysis, creates a conflict. This one is an expression of the transgressive attitude of the writer and the director. The passenger captures only some of the actor's – the demiurge's words. Those about the end of the world which means that about disappearing. Trapped in an empty train station, he sees no point in escaping. He enters the world of blurred meanings, devoid of context. From a man embedded in the present, he becomes a construct of the imaginations and prophetic, terrifying visions. He absorbs them indiscriminately. Dragan sees no other solution. The inertia and reluctance to change are indications of internal enslavement. The construction of the film is based on the contrast between the worlds that would exist next to each other in freedom, creating new contexts, thus broadening the field of analysis. In Dragan's etude, virtuality devours reality and enters unceremoniously, fully, into everyday life. The text about disappearance, death and inertia sets new rules of the game. Dragan rebels against such shifts of emphasis, but does not look for a deeper meaning in such a perception of the world. He succumbs to torn as well as more and more insistent images evoked by the figure of the demiurge. The boy at the train station disappears after the actor's words:

[...] Only a white-haired old man, who would be a prophet
 Yet is not a prophet, for he's much too busy,
 Repeats while he binds his tomatoes:
 No other end of the world will there be,
 No other end of the world will there be. (Miłosz 1945: 10)

Paradoxically, the title of the etude is also a reference to the prophetic poem by Czesław Miłosz, whose text had the same title. Can there not be another end of the world? This is not the dramatic question of Dragan's film. Rather, the director delves into why isolation may be the end of the world. A broken sequence of narratives, numerous flashbacks and blurred frames suggest that everyone has their own way to tame fears. Dragan's hero disappears because that is the easiest way. The documentary's etude breaks the link with the Aristotelian beginning, middle and end of the narrative. Only images count in an emergency. And random contexts.

Jacek Borcuch, invited to participate in the HBO project, celebrates his fiftieth birthday during the pandemic. That is why he consistently entitles his film *Today Is My Birthday*. In this way, he conducts a timeless dialogue with the space that was once taken over by Tadeusz Kantor. Borcuch is being theatrical. He realizes his black and white image, selecting random frames, illustrating the hopelessness of being in isolation. The cut-off birthday, inscribed in the space of celebration, turns in front of the audience into a chaotic search for meaning where there is none, or at least it disappears with time. Each shot is another hour of the day that would look different in the normal time. The black and white styling suggests dying slowly rather than making plans for the next fifty years of life. Borcuch struggles. On the secretary, he listens to dishonest greetings from friends which do not build peace, but review existing relationships. The director plunges into chaos and has no ambition to organize the images into sequences that bring new meanings. Chaos is good, chaos is right. It relieves you from thinking. The brain is resting, the director seems to be talking in an act of desperation. Pictures of cycling, compulsive driving, looking out the window at the passing clouds are the only reality. The voice that sounds sincere is the mother's words: *All day sucks!* And her son's answer: *Mom, fuck it.* Surrender or crossing the boundaries of your own arrangement? For me, after all, the transgressive enrichment of myself with a new, surprising experience. A construct arises out of chaos and it must temporarily give hope but it does not build new contexts or revealing associations. It is the primacy of destruction that has no ambition to re-exist in a world full of meanings.

Paweł Łoziński remains faithful to the poetics of the documentary film. In his etude entitled *Masks and People*, he asks random passers-by about how they feel during their isolation. He places the camera on the balcony. From there, surprising the interlocutors, he asks about the meaning of living in a pandemic, their fears and ways to deal with the new situation. Łoziński relies on fate. He waits for the next interlocutors, creating the illusion that only he is trapped at home, and they enjoy their freedom because they leave the safety zone to walk the dog out, do some shopping or ride a bicycle. This etude is only seemingly a record of emotions, a kind of documentary observation. In fact, the director goes deeper. He is allowed to do

so by the reporter's mask that he put on for the time of the recordings. It is not known, however, whether his protagonists answer honestly, or whether they also wear masks when being recorded to effectively hide the truth. The etude resembles an edited interview. Its form is not surprising. Łoziński made films in this way many times. However, the position of the sound engineer is surprising. He is above those he asks. Responders must look up to see the author. This situation additionally mobilizes and stresses them. The responses heard give a picture of a society lost in the excess of fake information. Everyone has an opinion, but is not sure if it is enough to survive. An old lady with a dog sees the meaning in prayer, a cyclist mocks, a woman in a red jacket talks compulsively about making silage, a couple who have just met persuade the director that time is of no importance in relationships, a middle-aged woman complains about the need to wear masks and a man who does not even try to talk gives a monologue about the big scam of pandemic fears. Łoziński paints a picture of the world plunged into chaos. In a situation where everyone has an opinion, it is difficult to talk about traditional communication. The author's transgression manifests itself only in asking questions. And multiplying the number of surprises. Only he takes the trouble of a conversation that turns out to be impossible. The punchline of his artistic activities are the words of a random woman who concludes: *This is what this is for. Maybe if the fish in the canal in Venice would have more air and better water, I will be healthy.* The only rule that organizes the material is that there is no such rule. Łoziński comes into play by accepting the rules of the absurd. This is exactly how he crosses the border of being a documentary filmmaker. It is no longer about the image of the truth, because the one in the face of the plague is no longer as important as it was before the masks fell off people.

In opposition to the form chosen by Paweł Łoziński, there is another film by the director, Mariusz Treliński, who was invited to participate in the HBO project. His etude, entitled *Nothing Will Stop This Spring*, from the first view, based only on the title, is optimistic. However, its open composition and the type of film narrative – incoherent, vibrating and segmented – suggest an ironic approach to the pandemic isolation topic. Well, everything limits the creative freedom. This is how we should understand the words of an artist who, in the process of decoding meanings, slowly loses his well-established identity. He loses faith in his abilities, and the concepts he compulsively returns to turn out to be unnecessary and too complicated in an emergency. Treliński states that talking about oneself paralyzes him. The director follows the doubts which he translates into chaotic images. In the film, words are uttered off-screen that emphasize a new, unrecognized situation, which seems to overwhelm the artist. Treliński concludes: *we were one voice, now ... this polyphony ...* – the director, fascinated by opera, suddenly negates its meaning. He looks for some peace in nature. It is not known what else could soothe his shaky interior. He cannot tell about himself linearly. He struggles, trying to put the heroes of his works in a new context. However, these activities do not lead to finding pragmatic meanings. They are a decomposition that remains at the stage of material (life) relocation without being glued together again and placed in a new context of meanings

(semiotic field). Treliński discovers that following one of his protagonists, in a metaphorical dimension, he could be a murderer. What? Whom? Perhaps the ideas that once constituted the meaning of his existence as a creator or even a demiurgical creator. Now, in this pandemic period, it does not make sense to be someone else. There remains duration and images that cancel out and exclude each other with each new frame. Treliński doubts, looks for his strength and gives up. He says: suspension, detention, paralysis. The numbers do not appeal to him, but the image of a broken tree on the horizon – does, because it is a sign of imperfection, a decomposing imbalance. The perspective of viewing from many perspectives makes no sense. Stagnation is better. And perseverance.

In conclusion, the analyzed etudes of directors, cinematographers and screenwriters contribute to the research on the textuality of films. The postulates of semiotics about the decomposition of codes, which are fragmented and properly profiled, are supposed to convey new meanings and are only partially valid in the context of the films presented. The creators fragment reality and time, but they do not build new, hopeful constructs. The world stopped trembling. And it is waiting to be re-structured.

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Abstract

The review article is an attempt at a media studies analysis of short films made by Polish filmmakers commissioned by the HBO digital platform. They are all in response to the pandemic situation of isolation. The analysis deals with the transgression of artistic attitudes towards danger. In it, I use the tools of contemporary semiology: verbal and non-verbal codes that participate in creating meanings through destruction and a new reading of meanings hidden in film messages. I prove that artists, first of all, commit transgression, negating the existing reality and looking for a new film language that contradicts the Aristotelian structure of the three acts in order to disperse the images and meanings they carry. Secondly, I argue that the deconstruction of codes and the reassembly of meanings proposed by semiologists takes place in the artistic activities in question, as if in the opposite direction. Deconstruction – indeed, but not to discover the truth in a new context, but to look for it in bits of reality that function separately and do not create meanings. They are only separately illuminated and contoured images.

Transgresje: filmowe zapisy czasu izolacji. Medioznawcza analiza krótkich metraży inspirowanych pandemią (projekt HBO)

Streszczenie

Artykuł przeglądowy jest próbą medioznawczej analizy filmów krótkometrażowych zrealizowanych przez polskich twórców na zamówienie platformy cyfrowej HBO. Wszystkie są odpowiedzią na pandemiczną sytuację izolacji. Analiza porusza temat transgresyjności postaw artystycznych wobec zagrożenia. Wykorzystuję w niej narzędzia współczesnej semiologii: kody werbalne i niewerbalne uczestniczące w tworzeniu sensów poprzez destrukcję i nowe odczytanie ukrytych w filmowych przekazach znaczeń. Udowadniam, po pierwsze, że artyści dokonują transgresji, negując zastaną rzeczywistość i poszukując nowego języka filmowego, który jest zaprzeczeniem arystotelesowskiej struktury trzech aktów na rzecz rozproszenia niesionych przez nie obrazów i sensów. Po drugie, przekonuję, że proponowana przez semiologów dekonstrukcja kodów i ponowne scalanie znaczeń odbywa się w omawianych działaniach artystycznych jakby w odwrotnym kierunku. Dekonstrukcja tak, ale nie po to, by odkryć prawdę w nowym kontekście, lecz szukać jej w odpryskach rzeczywistości, które funkcjonują osobno i nie tworzą sensów. Są jedynie osobno oświetlanymi i wyprofilowanymi obrazami.

Key words: short films, transgressions, verbal and non-verbal code, semiotics, borders

Słowa kluczowe: filmy krótkometrażowe, transgresje, kody werbalne i niewerbalne, semiotyka, granice

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