

Life Wins in the West. Agnieszka Holland's East-European Interpretation of *The Secret Garden*

EWA A. ŁUKASZYK

Uniwersytet Warszawski

ewa.a.lukaszuk@gmail.com

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The author of this essay interprets Agnieszka Holland's cinematographic adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* as a work of an East-European creator musing on the essence of Western civilisation and comments on it in the context of the present-day questioning of the European unity, values, and standards in Polish culture. In the analysis of Holland's cinematographic version of the novel, a special relevance is given to cultural (in)visibility of the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth. The East-West divide is interpreted in terms of divergent conceptualisations of the major human transformative actions: work and sacrifice. In the multimodal idiom of Holland's film, the music composed by Zbigniew Preisner occupies a special place. The East-European interpretation of the children's classic promotes a vision of Englishness (treated as a *pars pro toto* exemplification of the broader concept of "the West") as a space of resilience and triumphant life, against manipulative messages presenting the West as a space of corruption and "culture of death".

Justification of the Topic of Reflection

Several decades ago, George Steiner mused, in *Real Presences*, on the monstrous potential of proliferation inscribed in the critical discourse: "we are at liberty to say anything, to say what we will about anything, about everything and about nothing" (1989: 53). The perspective of scholarship for scholarship's sake is an ever-present menace; even more so, the possibility of defending erroneous aesthetical and ethical choices. What criteria make one topic more important than the other? What may justify a return to a work or a problem that had already been discussed? Certainly, Agnieszka Holland's cinematographic adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *The Secret Garden* is a work of great beauty, justifying a study – even a repeated one – because of the mastery of artistic means. Is this a sufficient reason? In 1993, Agnieszka Holland's film was a major achievement of Polish culture in its struggle for transnational recognition, waged in the aftermath of the collapse of the communist system. Holland's evolution from a cinematographic vision focused on Polish problems and historical circumstances, such as the death of the opposition priest Jerzy Popiełuszko in *To Kill a Priest* (1988), to lighter, more universal topics exploited in the international circulation under the auspices of Warner Bros may be seen as a conquest of a new space of freedom. It contrasts with her earlier concept of film-making as a form of political engagement, an opposition activity, since any cinematographic narration consisted essentially in showing "the crisis of the regime by showing the stagnating lives of small people" (Iordanova 2003: 108). In the realisation of her new artistic project, the Polish director counted with the collaboration of the best: the film's executive producer was Francis Ford Coppola. Holland successfully worked

with an international team, yet quite importantly, she also exploited the excellence available in her country of origin: the soundtrack was created by the leading Polish composer Zbigniew Preisner, winning “Best Music” at the 1993 Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards. No wonder that Holland’s *The Secret Garden* persistently focused considerable critical attention and has been thoroughly studied (Stephen and McCallum 1996; Davies 2001; Wells 2009; Birk 2012; Klonowska 2014, and other).

The choice of returning to Holland’s *The Secret Garden* thirty years later may be justified by the evolution of the cultural flux in which the individual work is immersed. The state of culture may soften the resonance of a work of art or close the polemics around it or, on the contrary, make them more strident. The value of a film as a cultural manifesto may become obsolete or redundant with time or, on the contrary, appear more resounding. In 1993, *The Secret Garden* was a dream conceived by an East-European creator shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, an emotional avowal of Europeanness, a vote in favour of Western civilisation. The choice of the English children’s classic as a canvas for a film was a deliberate act of establishing a creative connection with it at the source, in the universe of infancy, ingenuity, and purity, against the sore awareness of childhoods missed in the oppressive and grey reality of the Eastern Bloc. This initial enthusiasm has waxed and waned along the recent decades. The current cultural awareness of the Poles is haunted by a profound distrust in relation to Western values, standards, and ways of life. In her recent work, Holland is stridently critical of this new cultural turn. Her latest film, *The Green Border* (2023), thematising the tragedy of the migrants pushed back on the border between Poland and Belarus, provoked a violent controversy due to Holland’s uncompromising criticism of what she sees as a betrayal of the civilised standards and the hypocrisy of Polish society, that proudly defines itself as the *antemurale* of Christianity while committing atrocities against defenceless migrants.

The vote of Poland’s belonging to Europe, celebrated thirty years ago by the beautiful interpretation of Burnett’s narration, has been placed under an interrogation mark. Today’s right-wing manipulative messages often resemble the old communist propaganda, that strived to create a negative image of the West as a world that enjoyed material abundance, yet lacked morality, core values, and thus appeared as rotten from within. The phrase “rotten West” (*zgnily Zachód*) became a fixed idiomatic expression in Polish along the post-war decades. On the other hand, the present-day right-wing propaganda exploits the discourse created by the Catholic Church, speaking of the “culture (or civilisation) of death”. The notion of “civilisation of death”, introduced by Pope John Paul II, among other instances in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, is supposed to resume a nihilistic way of life, based on individualism and hedonism, the search for individual fulfilment rather than sacrifice, conjugated with sinful attempts at controlling life through medical means. This general attitude involves both contraception and conception *in vitro* (epitomising human hubris), as well as vindication of such rights as abortion and euthanasia. Also, the criticism resumed under the label of “civilisation of death” is often directed against “false” democracy, arguably based on moral relativism and nefarious secularisation. Such an attitude is treated as contradictory with the respect of God-given, supra-human vitality. The Western societies living according to the principles of human hubris are presented as sterile and stagnant.

The persistence of those notions in Polish culture makes Holland’s artistic challenge extremely important. Although *The Secret Garden* created a global impact, its message failed to prove sufficiently transformative in Eastern Europe. This is why it is crucial to reflect upon the legacy of *The Secret Garden* thirty years later. The manipulative notion of “the rotten West” lives

on, menacing to erode the cultural unity of Europe, while the initial enthusiasm for European values has vanished. As it will be shown in the analysis that follows, the ideological use of the categories of “life” and “death” creates a slippery ground that requires critical intervention. The defence of Life (understood as an abstract, God-given, supra-human value) against the presumed “culture of death” may foster a fundamental disrespect for individual human life without a capital letter (the presumed insignificance of a profane, worldly phenomenon). It may also justify lack of concern with human suffering, confronted with the exaltation of the transformative value of sacrifice. Inversely, the attitude based on hubris may foster an attitude of responsibility and care, as well as a profound trust in the transformative value of human work, creating the conditions for an authentic vitality, as celebrated in Holland’s *The Secret Garden*.

Over Mothers’ Dead Bodies

As a universal classic, Frances Hodgson Burnett’s novel deals, so to speak, with a mourning dysfunction. Mary Lennox, a self-centred, lonely 10-year-old child, proves unable to miss her mother after her death. She is unable to step into the process of mourning, while her uncle, Archibald Craven, equally self-centred in his sorrow, is unable to let go of his grief. He is unable to complete the mourning cycle after the death of his wife in childbirth. The twin sisters (the mother of Mary and Lillias Craven, the mother of Colin) that form the central couple of women in the story are characterised primarily by their absence, either real, caused by the death of the heavily pregnant, or affective, as her sister abdicates from her motherhood and distances herself from her child, even before the cholera epidemic (in the novel) or the earthquake (in the film) makes her absence factual. Also Lord Craven answers to the miscarriage trauma by radical isolation: he refuses to see anyone, most of all the newborn baby. Just like Mary’s mother, he built up an affective distance in relation to his son, because he feared that his death, that seemed imminent as the newly born baby was very weak, might kick him altogether out of his mental balance. In parallel, he responded to the threat lurking over the fragile infant by over-medication. Since his earliest childhood, Colin is put in the care of doctors and nurses, made object of numerous and varied therapies.

From East-European perspective, the health risks and possible lethal consequences of pregnancy and delivery are a taboo subject. In English literature, they gained relatively greater visibility. The dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, translated into both female and male traumas related to the delivery, were thematised in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. Frances Hodgson Burnett built up a clear intertextual reference situating the isolated Misselthwaite Manor in the ominous landscape of the moors. Taking up the literary material of Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* as a canvas for her cinematographic work, Agnieszka Holland could thus fill a void in her native culture, creating a symbolic representation of endangered pregnancy that was culturally hushed in Eastern Europe. Instead of admitting an open discussion of pregnancy and childbirth, Polish culture developed and exploited the notion of maternal sacrifice as an unconditional duty. A pregnant woman falls into the summary, yet culturally significant category of “the Mother Pole”. Her status is sacralised in an ambivalent and perverse way: she becomes a designated sacrificial victim. She is stripped of her individual rights on the altar of her child’s or children’s greater good. This cultural call for sacrifice denies not only the woman’s right to decide about her own life, but even to grant her biological survival. A mother’s duty, if such is her fate, is to die.

Western tendency to over-medication of pregnancy, childbirth and early childhood has no place in the East. Since the time Agnieszka Holland created her version of *The Secret Garden*, strands of activism and social campaigns, such as “Rodzić po ludzku” (“To give birth like a human”), under the auspices of the influential newspaper “Gazeta Wyborcza”, could have contributed to significant change of Polish reality. Nonetheless, contemporary Poland stands sharply against the European background as the country in which termination of pregnancy is bluntly forbidden or denied, even if the life of the mother is endangered. Other medical procedures belonging to the obvious European standard in obstetric healthcare are also severely restricted or unavailable. As I write these words, a vast majority of Polish women still give birth without the benefit of pain medication throughout labour. In case of pregnancy complications, life-saving medical procedures are postponed, resulting in deaths that contemporary medicine might have easily spared. The names of publicly identified victims, such as Izabela from Pszczyna or Dorota from Nowy Targ, are the cause of a considerable outcry, yet the protests risen by their deaths proved not strong enough to provoke a change in legislation or an improvement of healthcare standards. Quite on the contrary, in 2023, the newly appointed Polish minister of health Katarzyna Sójka stated impassibly that “women always died, are dying and will die”¹.

The ataraxic wisdom of the Polish health minister was unavailable to the mourning Archibald Craven. Treating his wife’s death as an event beyond any consolation, putting the reminder of his hope in medicine rather than faith, and even more importantly, adopting his individualistic, self-centred fixation on grief, Lord Craven might be seen as a perfect representative of the “civilisation of death” and a typical “rotten” Westerner. Yet, building her cinematographic narration, Holland moved away from the taboos and prejudices of her native culture with great subtlety and sensibility. Instead of condemning Craven for his excessive attitude or presenting the death of his wife as a natural and, in a way, normal event, she created an image of ambivalence framing a heavily pregnant woman in a blossoming garden. Exploring the secrets of the gloomy mansion, the children discover photographs made by Craven shortly before his wife’s death. They show her radiant and laughing on a swing, surrounded with the beauty of her rose garden. The movement of the swing conjugates the reckless joy and the fragility of her physiological condition. This image is an important innovation added to Burnett’s story, where Mrs Craven simply sat in the garden to read and got injured because a branch unexpectedly broke. The accident led to premature labour and her death during the delivery of her son Colin. Rather than proposing a euphemism or silencing this aspect in her version of the story, Holland exploited the symbol of a swing to express the ambivalence of vitality and looming menace inscribed in the figure of a pregnant woman. Creating a compelling metaphorical representation of pregnancy as a risk, Holland filled a blank space in her native, as well as universal culture. She increased the visibility not only of pregnancy as a part of womanhood, but also of an uncomfortable truth that the society would gladly put out of sight: that the birth of a new life may enter in contradiction with the survival of the mother.

¹“Śmierć ciężarnej 33-latki. Posłanka PiS: kobiety umierały, umierają i będą umierać” [Death of the pregnant 33-year-old. The deputy of “Law and Justice” Party: women died, are dying and will die] https://www.polsatnews.pl/wideo/smierc-ciezarnej-33-latki-poslanka-pis-kobiety-umieraly-umieraja-i-beda-umierac_6823185/ [Accessed: 24.08.2023].

Music to Say Things That Are Hard to Explain

Having in view a compelling, artistically mature expression of the East-European vote of faith and belonging to the Western civilisation in order to counter the notion of Western “rotteness” pervading her native culture, Agnieszka Holland counted with the contribution of an eminent Polish creator, Zbigniew Preisner. Two years earlier, in 1991, he created music for Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *The Double Life of Veronique*, another major example in the filmography speaking of the East-West divide in Europe. Kieślowski made use of the motif of the Doppelgänger, providing an East-European opera singer with a double, an identical young woman living on the opposite side of the Iron Curtain. The result is a blatant disparity of destinies produced by divergent attitudes toward life. Both women were predestined to die young due to an inborn defect leading to heart failure. Weronika, a Pole, tragically dies on stage, in the most sublime moment of the performance. Meanwhile, the anomaly of her Western double had been corrected by a surgical intervention shortly after her birth, so she did not develop any further health problems. The Western hubris, as a belief in human transformative powers, anticipates the dangers and fosters future-oriented actions, such as preventive medical intervention performed on a baby to exclude the development of a life-threatening condition. What is more, as the heart of the French Veronique was cured soon after her birth, the young woman is free to seek the delights of earthly love and individualistic fulfilment instead of the sublime death of her East-European counterpart. What is equally significant, the operatic music created by Preisner for *The Double Life of Veronique* is attributed to a fictitious 18th-century Dutch composer Van den Budenmayer. The music of this imaginary composer appears in other Kieślowski’s movies, most importantly in the *Three Colours* cycle (“Blue”), where Weronika’s performance is quoted in the E-minor soprano “Song for the Unification of Europe”.

In Holland’s film, the vision of the Western rose garden in full blossom lacks such a conspicuous, symmetrical opposition or East-European counterpart (although Burnett’s motive of twin sisters comes close to the double existence of Veronique). What is more, the analysis of music as a vehicle of ideological options is a particularly tricky analytical task. Nonetheless, it seems justifiable as a working hypothesis to interpret Preisner’s soundtrack of *The Secret Garden* as yet another, simple, sincere, and naïve song of love for Europe designed to bridge the East-West divide. The Kantian notion of the sublime, exemplified in the music attributed to the fictitious composer in Kieślowski’s film, is useful also for the understanding of the role played by Preisner’s work in *The Secret Garden*. As I dare to argue, the multimodal cinematographic narration of the English story strives to present the sublime of the European project of transformation of the world. Europe becomes a garden of an almost insupportable beauty, at the point of breaking the viewer’s heart, just as it happened to Weronika performing the newly discovered aria. The simple, almost naïve flute leitmotiv employed by Preisner in *The Secret Garden* is yet another sublime chant of fidelity to Western civilisation that stands the comparison with the operatic aria composed for *The Double Life of Veronique*. Preisner’s musical composition accompanying the images of spring, the rebirth of vegetable life and blossoming of the garden is a hymn to vitality, harmony and never-ending productivity of the European soil.

Other ideological notions may as well be associated with melodic themes in Preisner’s soundtrack. One of its highlights is the folk song performed in the kitchen by one of the servants. Full of disquieting, powerful longing and energy, the melody composed by Preisner may be interpreted as a hymn celebrating human work. In *The Secret Garden*, labour (in the

double sense of child delivery and transformational action) appears as the central Western value contrasting with the sacrifice (involved in a parallel quest for the sublime), celebrated in Polish culture. If we consider the complexity of Preisner's artistic work, also the presumed folk song composed for *The Secret Garden* may be treated as a counterpart of the aria of Weronika. The vitality and power of the simple song sung in the kitchen counterbalances and complements the death drive epitomised in the aria performed on the stage of the philharmonic house in Kraków.

The Earth and Labour

In many ways, Agnieszka Holland builds up upon the literary canvas, enriching the original message provided by Burnett with her peculiar, East-European contribution. But could the legacy of terror be seen as a positive one? Born in Stalinist times, burdened with the memory of her grandparents who perished in the Holocaust as well as her father's unexplained death (possibly during a violent interrogation at a police station), Agnieszka Holland overrides Burnett's story with her cataclysmic sensibility. It is visible right at the beginning of her film, as Mary Lennox loses her parents in an earthquake. The catastrophe is observed by the child from her Holocaust-like hiding place under the bed. In the original story, the catastrophic event was euphemised: Mary, unattended by her Ayah, drank a glass of sweet wine left on the table in an abandoned dining-room and slept soundly all the remaining time of the cholera outbreak. Life draining out of the familiar world of her first childhood was symbolised by a little snake "gliding along and watching her with eyes like jewels" (Burnett, 1911: 7). Finally, it slipped under the door making a rustling noise rather than a roar.

Similar expectation of a catastrophe and the preference given to the strident, unmitigated expression of trauma may be seen in the scene of the conversation between Lord Craven and Mary who asks for "a bit of earth". In Burnett's book, the moment is described as full of kindness, justified by the physical resemblance between Mary and Craven's dead wife: "You remind me of someone else who loved the earth and things that grow. When you see a bit of earth you want,' with something like a smile, 'take it, child, and make it come alive'" (104). Meanwhile, in Holland's interpretation, the unmitigated self-absorption of Craven in his grief comes to the fore. As John Stephens and Robyn McCallum conclude, "Holland's reformulation as a counsel of despair from a fragile and distraught man now emotionally runs past the usual more sentimental connection between Mary and Lilies to an apprehension that Mary's desire will only result in a desolation equivalent to Craven's own experience" (1994: 360-361).

The peculiarity of Holland's interpretation of the English novel may thus be resumed as a vision of a creative subject bringing her background of oppression and cataclysmic expectation into a universe characterised by greater stability and harmony. Holland comes from a country lacking such values as dignity, respect, democracy and strives to compensate her sore situation, accentuating the presence of those missing elements in her cinematographic narration. The premises of democracy in the recognition of a common human stance of the society's superiors and subalterns were glossed over rather elliptically in the original Burnett's text at the moment of the first encounter of Mary Lennox and her new maid Martha. Certainly, in English metropolitan society, in spite of the absence of colonial subalternity, class distinctions remained very profound. Yet the relations between the members of social strata are based on the notion of general human dignity and therefore tainted with respect. The rules and boundaries are binding for the social superiors just as for the subalterns. Martha stands apart from the Indian

ayahs who took care of Mary in her previous life: “The native servants she had been used to in India were not in the least like this. They were obsequious and servile and did not presume to talk to their masters as if they were their equals” (Burnett, 1911: 31-32). Mary experiences, for the first time in her life, the resistance of the will of those who she may see as her social inferiors. The same applies to the gardener Ben Weatherstaff who may well refuse to answer her questions. On the other hand, he does not hesitate to shorten the social distance, establishing a comparison, not quite a flattering one, between himself and the little miss: “We was wove out of th’ same cloth. We’re neither of us good lookin’ an’ we’re both of us as sour as we look. We’ve got the same nasty tempers, both of us, I’ll warrant.” (51). What comes to the fore in Holland’s version is the wonder and awe in confrontation with independent agency. Burnett contrasted the usages and attitudes characteristic for England with the colonial submissiveness of Indian servants. In the symbolic idiom of the film, as it may be argued, they stand apart from the denied freedom and dignity under the East-European authoritarian regimes. The wonderful independence is thus to be admired in social subalterns and even in non-human beings. It is epitomised in the self-reflective temperament of Martha (who reacts to Mary’s remark about her being a strange servant by musing on her own peculiarity) as well as the independence of wild animals: the robin, playing a crucial role as the guide indicating the way to the closed garden, is characterised as a being that does not admit nor obey orders.

Although nominally she belongs to the upper social stratum, Mary lives in a state of sore abjection. “I have nothing to play with”, she confesses, and her first cherished possession (the skipping rope) happens to be a present of those socially below her. What is more, it is through their intermediary that the young Miss Lennox acquires the tools enabling her to cultivate the garden, taking on the legacy maintained alive by the old gardener Ben over the span of the ten years after the death of Colin’s mother. The gardener is thus the true provider of this legacy, even if the land nominally belongs to Lord Craven. The uncle accepts to bestow the girl with the earth she asks for, yet contrary to Ben, he remains alienated from the vitality of the garden, because he declares himself unconvinced about any positive outcome of Mary’s endeavour.

Holland’s vision of the garden privileges the rose as a deeply “cultured” vegetable element, a plant that requires more human care than other species. The labour for the roses’ sake may be assumed by anyone, with no restriction of social class, age or gender. It unites the young Miss Lennox with Ben across the generational gap and with Dickon, her servant’s brother, across the difference of social class. What is more, the rose garden epitomises the challenge of organising and curating the world and its “growin’ things”. Bringing the garden back to life, as it has been suggested, prioritises the transformative value of human work over sacrifice. The profane, earthly, light-coloured blossoms that Mary cultivates stand apart from a possible Catholic resonance of the red rose as a symbol of martyrdom (that incidentally are a leitmotiv in Holland’s cinematographic work, reappearing in *The Green Border*, where the migrants predestined to dehumanisation and death receive red roses). Agnieszka Holland incessantly repeats and reformulates her warning that the culture that valorises roses of martyrdom can easily precipitate into the acceptance and “normalcy” of the viewpoint that women – or migrants, or some other category of lesser beings – must perish, be exposed to the danger of death, or at least suffer unmitigated pain. On the other hand, the symbolic language developed in *The Secret Garden* depicts labour that does not need to come close to death, torture or humiliation to acquire transformative and enlivening value.

The Feminine Uncorrupted

Already in an early review of Holland's film, Gloria Avrech identified its central theme as "the absence or abuse of the Feminine" (1994: 151). What is more, in diverse interpretations of *The Secret Garden*, the double motherhood of the twin sisters was often seen as a device permitting to contrast "good" and "evil" women. While the "good" sister sacrifices herself in motherhood, the "evil" one dedicates her time to the sinful, typically feminine pursuit of vanity and mundane pleasures:

The operative female schema emerges clearly in comparison with the Holland film, in which Mary and Colin's mothers are twinned in order to split the mother-*imago* into good and bad (especially in terms of the mother who gives [Lilias] and the mother who withholds), and this is further reflected in present actuality in Medlock and Martha (Medlock commands, drags Mary around, locks her up and would send her away; Martha, still part girl herself, touches, tickles, and encourages conversation, play and affection). (Stephens; McCallum, 1994: 362)

Yet the distribution of roles in Holland's film may also be interpreted differently. Mary's mother may rather be paired with Lord Craven as an image of double refusal of assuming the parental function, caused by trauma and the fear of further emotional breakdown. Craven, who may be seen as a "culprit" of his wife's death (as he was of course instrumental in making her pregnant), for ten years refused to assume the paternal affects. Also for Mary's mother, the rejection of affective acceptance of motherhood might have a lot to do with her twin sister's miscarriage and death.

As the cinematographic narration develops, the affective connection is restored not only between Colin and his father, but also between Mary and her deceased mother, namely in the sequence illustrating a dream or a recollection from Mary's earliest childhood. The disquieting scene showing a very young child among the giant leaves of gunnera, a kind of giant rhubarb common in English botanical gardens, marks the presence of a happier memory pushed down into the unconsciousness. The dream permits to re-establish the connection with a happy past, in which Mary's mother was still alive and emotionally available. The traumatic memory of maternal insensibility and distance is exorcised by the symbolic image of the gunnera plant. Its succulent young leaves, before their full expansion, are tightly wrapped in the centre of the plant and may serve as a symbolic image of uterine protection and maternal intimacy. The dream staging the gunnera plants marks the reconciliation between the girl and the memory of her mother. What is more, it is curious to observe that a dream also plays a crucial role in assuming paternity. Fallen asleep in a hotel armchair during one of his interminable travels away from home, Lord Craven is suddenly awakened by a particularly vivid dream. In the logic of the cinematographic story, this dream is the result of a magical ritual invented by Mary and Colin. Be that as it may, he decides to return home and engage in the relationship with his rejected son.

As Maire Messenger Davies (2001) has shown, both Burnett's novel and Holland's film contain numerous hints of sexuality and sexual-emotional content present in the experience of preadolescent children. The initial sequence of the film, showing Mary Lennox being dressed by her Indian servants, might be susceptible to interpretation in terms of possible "sub-pornographic" codes. Even if Mary and her cousin Colin sleep in the same bed (a detail that is absent in the original novel), Holland's recognition of the presence of preadolescent sexuality is

encoded primarily in the language of natural imagery, exploiting the notion of paradise-like innocence rather than that of corruption. In the metaphorical progression of the cinematographic narration, “sub-pornographic” acts of being dressed in India are abandoned in favour of “decent” acts of dressing by herself in England, just as the bed as a space of encounter and the shared secret of the children is abandoned in favour of the garden. The act of denuding Colin’s body does not belong to a scenario of sexual-intellectual epistemophilia, or the Freudian *Wisstrieb*. Even if the scene is interrupted violently by the caretaker as if the children were caught up doing something dirty, the act of touching Colin’s body befits rather a logic of inspection. Mary examines his cousin’s back only to declare authoritatively that he is not a hunchback, he did not inherit his father’s condition. As a result of this rough inspection and the authoritative verdict pronounced by Mary, Colin discovers that he is not going to die, as it was feared. His first act on the side of life is his decision to go out and find his mother’s garden. The possibility of corruption is evaded, and preadolescent energies are channelled in the care of the vegetable kingdom.

This evasion of Eros, or its suspension, exorcises, at least for the time being, also Thanatos. The garden of innocent delights may become an unspoiled paradise. Even Lord Craven, having finally closed the cycle of his grief, may be reintroduced into its walled perimeter. The scene of the inspection of Colin’s back by Mary is almost literally repeated at the moment of the mutual recognition of father and son. Lord Craven, who did not yet see his son standing upright and able to walk, surprises him while playing the game of blind man’s buff with Mary and Dickon. Allowing his son’s hands to palp his face, Lord Craven lets himself be known and symbolically assumes his paternity. Stretching his hands to explore by palpation his father’s face, Colin is revisiting his first infancy rather than anticipating his sexual adulthood.

The hypothesis of quasi-erotic relation between the cousins might eventually help to explain two crisis episodes in the film. The first one takes place when Colin sees Mary ride away with Colin on the back of his pony. In a tantrum of jealousy, he falls on the floor and starts shouting hysterically. As a result, Mary, in spite of her young age, assumes the authority, shouting Colin back to his reason. Similarly, Colin also breaks through the boundaries of his infantile condition, speaking as the master of the house in the absence of his father (who still travels away from home, refusing to accept his paternity). In the overall interpretation of the scene of Colin’s tantrum, the accent may thus be moved away from erotic jealousy to the necessity of establishing a subtle balance of power between the protagonists. The second episode of crisis takes place at the moment of the aforementioned recognition of father and son. Mary suddenly feels alien to this newly formed couple and exclaims in utter disarray: “No one wants me!” Arguably, this scene may be interpreted as a moment of establishing a new balance of proximity and status, a moment in which the place occupied by each of the protagonists is shifting. A new balance of power and energy is found almost immediately as Lord Craven recognizes Mary’s contribution in bringing them “back to life” and acknowledges her right to occupy a place in the family framework. The three of them stroll energetically through the meadow under the glance of the household servants who look at them through the window.

Female energy, recovered as soon as Mary finds the key to the hidden door of the garden in her aunt’s bureau, reconfigures a larger framework of relations between the protagonists, including a new, healthier formula of relations between household’s supervisor, Mrs. Medlock, and her young servant, who, as a gesture of consolation and solidarity, stretches her hand

around the older woman's back. What is more, it is through this recovery of feminine power that also wounded masculinity (both in Lord Craven and Colin) may be healed.

The vision of femininity as an uncorrupted element counters the depreciation of women that is certainly a common European problem, yet that remains particularly blatant in contemporary Eastern Europe, where women proved to be the losers of the political transformation. In determined spheres of life, such as reproductive rights, they suffer nowadays greater oppression than throughout the communist period. What is more, their vindications are often dismissed as the woman is placed on the side of the "civilisation of death". This is why Holland's vision of femininity as sound and uncorrupted is still such an important legacy thirty years later.

Conclusion

In an interview conceded to John C. Tibbetts, Agnieszka Holland speaks about her memories related to Burnett's children's classic:

"I grew up with that book," she explains. "I was reading all the time and that was one of my favourite stories. And when I had the chance to make it into a movie, I knew that for a change I could tell a simple story and concentrate on the depth of Mary's change from petty, spoiled child to a loving, life-inspiring creature. However, you can find places in it where I was forced to add some details to brighten things up – more shots of flowers and animals running around and that sort of thing. I hated that." (2008: 139)

Western books, such as Astrid Lindgren's *The Bullerby Children* or A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, shaped Polish childhoods, providing the post-war generation of Poles, educated behind the Iron Curtain, with a vision of a world more harmonious and happier than their own. At the same time, reading them was flawed by a persistent feel of estrangement, as they evoked not only the ideal worlds, but also, to a large degree, an axiology of care, respect, harmony, and order that laid out of our boundaries, both politically and mentally. It was, in a way, too much sweetness to bear. Perhaps it explains the director's reluctance in exploring artistically such images as flowers and happy animals. She was used to a darker, gloomier aesthetics. Unfortunately, the return of the gloom was to happen almost two decades after Poland's integration in the prosperous world of Western civilisation. In *The Green Border*, contrary to the last sequence of the film analysed here, the whole world ceases to be a garden, revealing deep fissures of the vital, resilient, uncorrupted humanness that seemed to triumph in the adaptation of Burnett's novel.

The recovery of the garden is a symbol of reconciliation performed by a next generation. The space marked with loss and seclusion after the death of the pregnant woman is reconquered as a paradise of healing, growth and maturation. The children's literature providing individual lives with a mental foundation of order, harmony, and stability, the gardening craze – those elements of the English culture may not appear as central in the nationalistic hierarchy of importance. Nonetheless, those margins of Englishness are treated as the most inspiring by the East-European creator. Just as Yorkshire with its landscape of moors stands for England, England stands for the essence of the West, resuming, as a *pars pro toto*, the civilised life. An East-European subject immersed in the post-war alienating history may eventually identify with Mary Lennox's return from India and her discovery of a different life: a life based on the trust in transformative efficacy of human work and the respect for human

dignity epitomized by humble people, an element which was often missing in the East paying merely lip service to the egalitarian values of communism. Holland chooses to present the West as a space of resilience, deconstructing the idioms of corruption that might eventually be found also in the original text she took as her starting point. In her cinematographic idiom, she euphemizes even the moor, the very essence of the haunting landscape of English literature, the synecdoche of a barren world, transforming it into a visual sign of open horizons connoting liberation and transformative perspectives of the “growin’ things”.

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