

INTRODUCTION

AESTHETIC UNFINALIZABILITY

*Narrative Irresolution at a
Time of Great Conclusions*

The Polish science fiction writer Stanisław Lem's novel *Imaginary Magnitude* (*Wielkość urojona*, 1973) consists entirely of introductions to nonexistent books. "The art of writing Introductions has long demanded proper recognition," states Lem's narrator, and he complains that contemporary art has become a forgery, "a promissory note without (transcendental) cover, a (counterfeit) pledge, and (unrealistic) forecast."¹ The author deems himself a "liberator" of the genre of introductions, setting beginnings free from such false promises, and his ode to introductions surfaces at a moment in Polish political history that can itself be charged as being one of "(counterfeit) pledges" and "(unrealistic) forecasts." Poland in the late socialist era is remembered for its frequent revolutions and burgeoning public resistance, and yet it was still marked by an ideology of the permanence of the communist system. The end that followed nearly a half century of socialist rule, however, was not Communism fulfilled but indeed its shocking collapse. How did Polish cinema and literature figure into that uncertain moment when endings were so charged? What was the role of conclusions during a decades-long wait for a utopic eternity? And what happened with fictional endings at this time that itself turned out to be "the end"? I will address

these questions by investigating an artistic transformation in Polish cinema that occurred in the early 1970s. Corresponding with Lem's prompt to emancipate introductions, artists at this time began to not only redeem beginnings but to reject narrative endings.

False starts and ambiguous conclusions contradicted socialist doctrine, which was purpose-based and promised an eschatological future: the achievement of "pure Communism." After 1948 Marxist-Leninism was taught on all levels in schools in the East Bloc, even kindergarteners were introduced to teleological thinking.² While these educational requirements loosened significantly after 1956 in Poland, it was still a reasonable expectation that all citizens must know at least some fundamental Marxist-Leninist principles, and the most important one was laid out by Marx in 1875 in *The Critique of the Gotha Program*.³ Socialism would consist of two phases, wrote Marx, "Socialism," and its ideal fulfillment, "Communism."⁴ This assumption was so important, Herbert Marcuse wrote in his 1958 critical examination of Soviet Marxism, that "all ideological efforts" in the Soviet Union following the last period of Stalinism were organized under this principle.⁵ Eastern Europe during state Socialism was a time of social development, the initial stage of Socialism.⁶

Communism was yet to be reached, and by the 1970s this communist utopia with its indeterminable deadline had been endlessly postponed for decades; holding out hope for Communism to come was increasingly reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot*. This time of frustrated longing and increased skepticism about Communism being just over the horizon was mirrored in a new artistic style characterized by its lack of conclusion. Through analysis of major cinematic works by Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kiesłowski, Krzysztof Zanussi, Wojciech Has, and Tadeusz Konwicki, as well as analysis of Konwicki's novels, in this book I will demonstrate this shared predilection among artists in the late socialist era to defer or completely eschew narrative closure.

In Poland in the last two decades of the socialist period, resistance toward resolution and the undermining of accomplishment permeated every aspect of works of art, occurring on the level of plot, in the choice of themes, and even in experimentation with form. I call this artistic tendency *aesthetic unfinalizability*.⁷ The films I have chosen to exemplify aesthetic unfinalizability go beyond traditional narrative irresolution in that their open endings do not refer exclusively—or even necessarily at all—to the film's end but, rather, to all

the closures within it. Aesthetic unfinalizability may encompass the frustration of the traditional cliff-hanger, or a closing freeze-frame, but the annoyance it invokes stems also from story lines themselves about aimless wandering or of queues that lead to nowhere. Unfinalizability originates in broken off communication, sentences never spoken or completed, and it stems from the sudden cut through which something appears to have been edited out. Open endings in this context refer to all the openness that happens *before* an ending. Eliot Borenstein described something similar when he wrote about “a note of permanently frustrated suspense,” unresolved plot lines that leave the audience wondering what is missing, or what could have happened next, beyond a search for an author’s intent.⁸

Aesthetic unfinalizability presents itself in unresolved story lines and conflicts: films and novels are dedicated to unmet goals, to characters who strive unsuccessfully, and to buildings that are never finished. On the level of themes, aesthetic unfinalizability can be seen in a preoccupation with immortality: ghosts and resurrections inhabit diegetic worlds in which the afterlife is merely a seamless continuation of life. In unfinalizable texts, movement lacks direction and waiting is merely a way of passing time. In fact, time itself, flowing without any particular purpose, is enthusiastically examined in fiction during this period. Present, past, and future are phenomenologically investigated in films and novels that include direct discussions of subjective experiences of existing in time. This fascination with temporality also extends into the structure of the artistic work; by experimenting with narrative form, artists attempt to capture the essence of time. Films and novels might follow seemingly straightforward time lines and yet confuse the present with the remembered past, or an action that appears to be played out in real time might turn out to be only a moment in an endless repetition. Circularity, temporal spirals, in the case of Wojciech Has’s *The Hourglass Sanatorium* (*Sanatorium pod klepsydrą*, 1973) a temporal Möbius loop, and a filmic reenactment of the Big Bang, all structurally attempt to answer the question “What is time?”

Aesthetic unfinalizability was also manifested on a structural level through excessive use of punctuation or, conversely, the lack thereof. We see it in sudden breaks in language, in frozen frames, and in visual ellipses that stylistically deny texts any sense of an ending. The text is complete but the plot remains unresolved. More important, doubt is transformed into artistic expression with

frustration as its goal. In Wajda's works, for instance, monologues are interrupted and questions are left unanswered. Konwicki writes steady streams of unfinished topics, stories, and sentences. Kieślowski even named one of his films *No End* (*Bez końca*, 1981), and indeed it closes with a new beginning.

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Aesthetic unfinalizability, if understood as a refusal to end, was far more than an artistic preference or a passing trend; it was a radical political act. The obsession with historical teleology saturated Polish public life during Socialism to such a degree that instances of nonclosure or ambivalent endings emerged as polemical responses to official ideology. By satirizing endings or their very possibility, artists were in effect also satirizing Marxism's most important tenet; unlike official Marxist ideology, these stories offered no finality.

In Lem's anthology of introductions, *Imaginary Magnitude*, the author offers a recipe for more honest contemporary art: "It is precisely this unrealisability which should be taken as its motto and bedrock. That is why I am right to present an Introduction to this short Anthology of Introductions, for I am proposing prefaces that lead nowhere, introductions that go nowhere, and forewords followed by no words at all." Perhaps Lem, in jest, acknowledges the budding trend of unfinalizability, or he may be expressing a genuine sentiment, a reflection upon false political promises. Lem not only cites unfinalizability as an underlying aesthetic principle, he promotes it explicitly. His book exemplifies its utmost form, and in this introduction he practically pens its manifesto. In order to escape false promises and unrealizable goals, literature must be without end, he states, fiction must be a chronicle of a process leading nowhere: "I may thrust the reader into nothing and thereby simultaneously snatch him away from all existences and worlds. I promise and guarantee a wonderful freedom, and give my word that Nothing will be there." The author challenges not only the need for an end but even the need for content. His writing leads to Nothingness, with no promises—other than a promise of Nothing and a safe escape from teleology and unachievable red sunsets.⁹

As in Lem's novel, the present book's introduction will be followed by writings about texts that appear to lack something. However, where Lem sees a whole lot of nothing, this author locates quite a bit of something. The richness of nothingness is captured in a poem entitled "The Three Oddest Words"

(“Trzy słowa najdziwniejsze”) by the Polish poet and Nobel laureate Wisława Szymborska:

When I pronounce the word Future,
 the first syllable already belongs to the past.
 When I pronounce the word Silence,
 I destroy it.
 When I pronounce the word Nothing,
 I make something no non-being can hold.¹⁰

Any word, even the word “nothing,” is greater than actual nothingness, and while requesting silence the poet herself breaks it. Cliff-hangers, ellipses, and pauses are quite telling, even if silent, and there is much to read in the gaps that are left behind in the moments when viewers and readers expect resolution. In this book I explore the richness of different kinds of gaps, lacks, and unendings, from the level of the abandoned work of art, left unintentionally unfinished, to the pointed use of the trope of immortality and images of impossible construction.

There is no end to the works that could have been chosen to exemplify the richness of Polish art and culture in the decades before the fall of Socialism, and I do not promise any sort of complete or comprehensive picture. Instead, I turn to some works that most clearly illustrate aesthetic unfinalizability as it appeared in cinema while I acknowledge that similar features could likely be found in other popular artistic genres such as political cabarets, prose, and poetry. Likewise, many more filmmakers could have been chosen to exemplify this cinematic moment. The absurd comedies of Stanisław Bareja amused and informed contemporary viewers, as did the science-fiction dystopias created by Piotr Szulkin. The tone of the works by Marek Koterski evokes similarities to one of this book’s protagonists, Tadeusz Konwicki, but Koterski’s production is limited to the 1980s whereas the main focus of this book is the 1970s. The artists who have been chosen to highlight this inclination are renowned auteurs whose works span a long period of time. Most of them were productive already in the 1950s and 1960s as socialist realists, and they continued producing after 1989. Since their large oeuvres span a long period marked by many great political changes and helped define Poland as a cultural nation, their narratives effectively both depicted and rewrote the narratives of their time. For this reason, it

is they who serve as prime examples for my aim to redefine how we today understand the end time that was 1989.

Andrzej Wajda (1926–2016) is perhaps the most acclaimed Polish filmmaker. His first feature film, *A Generation (Pokolenie)* was made in 1955, and he maintained his popularity throughout his life during which he made more than forty films and directed multiple theater plays. Wajda's international popularity may be exemplified by the many awards he has won, such as the Golden Prize at the Ninth Moscow International Film Festival (1975) and the Palme d'Or (1981). In 2000 he was awarded an honorary Oscar, and in 2006 he received a Golden Bear for his lifetime achievements.

Krzysztof Kiesłowski (1941–1996) began his career in the 1960s as a documentary filmmaker, but he soon began making fiction features that grew popular in Poland in the 1970s. He earned international attention in the early 1990s with his European coproductions beginning with *The Double Life of Veronique (La double vie de Veronique; Podwójne życie Weroniki, 1991)*, and his *Three Colors* trilogy, *Red, White, and Blue (Trois couleurs: Rouge, Blanc, Bleu, 1993–1994)*. Throughout his career Kiesłowski was awarded, among many others, the Cannes Festival FIPRESCI prize (1988), the Venice Film Festival FIPRESCI prize (1989), and the Venice Film Festival Golden Lion Award (1993). *Red* was nominated for Academy Awards for best director, best original screenplay, and best cinematography in 1995.

Debuting in 1969, Krzysztof Zanussi (1939–) is a generation younger than his colleagues studied in this book. He has been, and is still, prolific within the Polish film world having directed close to thirty feature films, the last one in 2015. Zanussi has won the Cannes Jury Prize (1980) and the Golden Lion (1984). His lifetime achievement award from the Forty-Third International Film Festival of India (2012) testifies to his international appeal and continued importance.

Wojciech Has (1925–2000) directed more than ten films during his career. He is perhaps best known for the surrealist masterpiece *The Saragossa Manuscript (Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie, 1965)* that was famously admired even by Luis Buñuel.¹¹ Has won awards such as the Jury Prize in Cannes (1973), the FIPRESCI prize at Locarno International Film Festival (1959), and a Polish lifetime Achievement Award (1999).

Tadeusz Konwicki (1926–2015) claims a more moderate international following. As a novelist, screenwriter, and film director he concerned himself

mostly with local, Polish issues. In particular his films and books concern his own experiences as a fighter in the Polish resistance movement during World War II. He has been continuously awarded prizes at European film festivals throughout his long career, from the main award at the Brussels World Fair (1958) to the Polish Eagle (Orzeł) life achievement award (2002).

All the protagonists of this book are thus renowned, are all well established, and have been remarkably prolific. They are different enough that their distinct kinds of filmmaking can illustrate the breadth of aesthetic unfinalizability. At the same time the fact that their oeuvres span such a long time and are so rich illustrates the mass influence of unfinalizability. Yet, these directors should not only be analyzed as unique individuals, they represent something collectively greater. Polish film production in the 1970s rests on the kind of liberty that was afforded to Polish film artists at the time but that had been earned already over a decade earlier. The thaw of 1956 brought changes to cinema and to political conditions for filmmakers. Changes in censorship rules allowed more foreign films to be screened in Poland and to influence Polish directors and inform their audiences. Consequently “social criticism spread through the arts.”¹² The late 1950s and early 1960s brought about the evolution of the so-called Polish Film School (Polska szkoła filmowa). Films from this period, although still political, focused on critical realism intending to show Polish life more truthfully than earlier socialist realist works had done. The Polish School dealt with recent history as a main theme; World War II and the immediate postwar were typical motifs. Political criticism had thus already been a key aspect of early Polish postwar cinema.

Furthermore, in the Poland of the 1970s, filmmaking was a collective effort. All the participants belonged to a film unit in which they worked together. The film units were state enterprises, but since they were run by artists they had a surprising amount of liberty compared to some other socialist states. Each unit was organized around the work of literary directors and production managers who worked closely with the film directors, producers, and screenwriters who belonged to the unit. Young graduates of the Łódź film school, for example, became close collaborators already during their studies and continued to work together and collaborate on many projects in the unit structure.¹³ In this milieu collaborations flourished, friendships were forged, and alliances were made. Since filmmakers worked closely together they were naturally influenced by similar themes, leading to particular trends.

One popular movement spearheaded by Wajda, Kieślowski, and Zanussi was the so-called Cinema of Moral Anxiety (*kino moralnego niepokoju*) that arose in the late 1970s.¹⁴ Films made in this period examined how political processes in the repressive Polish state weakened moral values by focusing on tense and crumbling interhuman relationships. Individual and institutional hypocrisy and power dynamics were explored, for example, by Zanussi in *Camouflage* (*Barwy Ochronne*, 1978) and in *The Constant Factor* (*Konstans*, 1980), which both stand as a key examples of Moral Anxiety films. Zanussi's colleague Krzysztof Kieślowski also came to prominence as an important director within this movement. Kieślowski's *Camera Buff* (*Amator*, 1979) about a naive amateur filmmaker who quickly learns the realities of politics and filmmaking in Poland stands as an especially apt example of Moral Anxiety cinema. Not only did the colleagues make valuable contributions individually within this movement, they communicated explicitly with one another in their films. Zanussi featured the marble statue from Wajda's politically controversial film *The Man of Marble* (*Człowiek z marmuru*, 1976) in a scene in *Camouflage*, and Zanussi himself appeared in a cameo role in Kieślowski's *Camera Buff*, which also included the insertion of a scene from *Camouflage* making Zanussi a de facto spokesperson for the movement.

While not engaged in the Cinema of Moral Anxiety, Konwicki's films and prose alike are also prime examples of Polish oppositionist art in the 1970s, and his double role as filmmaker and writer makes him a significant figure for scholarly analysis. One particularly striking irony is that, even at some points during which Konwicki's literature was forbidden by the communist regime and published samizdat, he enjoyed a reputation as an acclaimed and accepted maker of artistic film and even served as chief of the popular film unit Kadr. Konwicki's works engaged with national trauma and were similar to the kind of critical realism that marks the Polish Film School, and he stands alone as a unique auteur. His works have a rare sarcasm to them and they engage with simple human relations even more deeply than with collective tragedy. Although Wajda and Konwicki collaborated in the adaptation of Konwicki's *A Chronicle of Amorous Incidents* (*Kronika wypadków miłosnych*, 1985), in general Konwicki's cinema bears a greater resemblance to works by Wojciech Has. Unlike the other protagonists of this book Has was never directly political.¹⁵ He created filmic dreamscapes in which history, present, and future exist alongside each other simultaneously. Because these philosophical and surrealistic depictions occur in

the historical context of unfinalizability, however, their conflation of times past and present become political as they ultimately make up statements about the future to come.

REWRITING THE HISTORICAL FUTURE

Eschatological history was a myth that had long determined Polish political consciousness. Even before Socialism, Poland's national tale was one of struggle, progress, and a seemingly utopian goal: Polish liberty. For 123 years Poland did not appear on any contemporaneous map because of partitions made among Prussia, Russia, and the Austrian Empire in 1795, and yet the poetry and literature of that era insisted that there was life so long as the Polish people held on to their particular cultural spirit. As the Polish artist Jan de Holewinski wrote: "the Polish state ceased to exist over a century ago. Yet her bitterest enemy would not dare to contend that Poland is dead."¹⁶ In spite of the partitions, the loss of all political power, and the complete elimination of a topos on the map, Poland still lived on within the Poles. This is the sentiment of the Polish national anthem written in 1797 with its opening line, "Poland has not perished yet, as long as we live."¹⁷ In a state of complete national dissolution, the only fitting hymn was one that promised a homeland regained. In the nineteenth century, romantic patriotism and Catholicism were given a messianic orientation under the pen of the national bard, Adam Mickiewicz. In his epic poem *Forefathers' Eve (Dziady)*, published in parts from 1821 to 1860, he went so far as to equate Poland with the Messiah himself, calling it "The Christ of Europe." In 1832 he wrote of Poland that "on the third day that soul shall return to the body, and the Nation shall arise and free all the peoples of Europe from slavery."¹⁸

The allegory of the Messiah offers the ultimate happy ending as a reward for all the struggles that had become a vital part of the Polish sense of self. Eschatology, even messianism, had thus molded Polish history and intellectual life for centuries before Socialism gave these ways of thinking a new brand. Socialism promised not a liberation but an eternity, and in this way it represented the antidote to the constantly disrupted history of Poland. Aesthetic unfinalizability stripped Polish culture of both illusions—there would be no liberty, there would be no goal—and in effect revealed that pre-Marxist history and Marxist history were not so different.

Unfinalizable fictions did not just identify, or even parody, teleological historiography; they formulated new narratives that helped create a version of history that allowed for an alternative future, one relieved of the communist goal. “Every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience,” states Giorgio Agamben, and thus “the original task of a genuine revolution . . . is never merely to change the world but also and above all to ‘change time.’”¹⁹ In Poland, unfinalizable narratives corresponded precisely to a shift in temporal consciousness. Such a transformation did not follow the political revolution; it was encouraged in the literature and cinema that preceded the revolution of 1989. Thus it is not simply that the fall of Communism required adjusted narratives responding to the implausibility of Marxist logic, or that the past and future were reconsidered only in a post-1989 present. In the case of Poland, a change in narrative paved the way for the fall, and writing nonteleologically, in essence, aestheticized its very possibility. Narrating an alternative historiography translated into identifying a previously unrecognized force guiding society. After all, what was this moment if not a step on the progressive road to Communism? And what else could Poland be if not a building block on this road? The possibilities for a reformed understanding of self were endless once the assumption of a specific goal was removed, allowing for a new perception of time.

Frank Kermode has famously stated that modern life can be distinguished by a sense of an ending; apocalypse is not only how we organize narratives but also how we organize and understand time at all. The apocalypse, however, has been transformed into a never resolved crisis, and the idea of the end is no longer imminent, but immanent.²⁰ In Poland during late Socialism the *impossibility* of an end becomes culturally immanent, to borrow Kermode’s terms. If his reading of the end applies to a Western concept of crisis, unfinalizability and antiteleological time lines were the artistic translations of the socialist Polish crisis and its lack of direction. Narratives of irresolution, frustration, and hesitation redefined Poland from having been a country in prologue, always about to become something, to one existing not only in medias res but as merely a middle with no end. False promises and postponed goals—never *no* but always *not yet*—were replaced with no promises at all.

Kermode’s theory of endings corresponds well to art in the early socialist context, wherein narratives supposedly reflected Soviet ideology.²¹ Socialist realism, which was the only permissible form of Soviet art beginning with the

formation of the Soviet Writers' Union (Soyuz Pisateley S.s.r.) in 1932, became a dominant art style in all socialist countries. Involved in all domains of literary and visual arts the union's purpose was the furtherance of the goals of Socialism and Communism. This proletarian art with its compulsory components of ideological commitment and party devotion resulted in a kind of dual modality: the simultaneous depiction of the world as it was and, more important, how it ought to be.²² As stated at the Nineteenth Party Congress in 1952, "the typical" was no longer "that which is encountered most often, but that which most persuasively expresses the essence of a given social force. From a Marxist-Leninist standpoint, the typical does not signify some sort of statistical mean."²³ While socialist realism changed over time, its original idea was thus to artistically illustrate the bright future promised by Marxist ideology; in constructing ideal characters ("positive heroes"), fiction showed that by following a socialist path the Soviet Union would reach its politically determined future.

Writing under a pseudonym, the Russian dissident Andrei Sinyavsky described the wide range of socialist realism and its social purpose: "A poet not only writes poems but helps, in his own way, to build Communism; so too, do sculptors, musicians, agronomists, engineers, laborers, policemen, and lawyers, as well as theaters, machines, newspapers, and guns."²⁴ The socialist artist had a purpose as clear and forceful as any other political instrument; art was as powerful as bullets. Writers acted as the "engineers of human souls," rewriting the population into "new Soviet men and women" with increased party-mindedness and class consciousness. By authoring positive role models, writers were in effect thought to be constructing a dedicated polis and a better society. Gary Saul Morson describes the goal of the socialist realist hero as a struggle to "become one with' his Marxist-Leninist role." He was uncomplicated, even two-dimensional, and lived simple plots that were comprehensible to the proletarian reader.²⁵ Such an inspiration certainly appears more noble than Polish "aesthetically unfinalizable" characters, such as Tadeusz Konwicki's eponymous flâneur who, like some kind of modern superfluous man, wanders Warsaw driven by lust for women and alcohol. He is a purposeless outsider with no real goal; he merely philosophizes. Aesthetic unfinalizability can be read as a direct antithesis of traditional socialist realist texts; not only did it look differently and favor opposing aesthetic ideals, the political implications of aesthetic unfinalizability also contrasted with the goals of the mandated socialist style. With socialist realism attributing such revolutionary importance to art, certainly

a counter-aesthetic must be read as equally powerful in its potential to deconstruct the Soviet men and women built by socialist realist prose. Konwicki and Wajda were both socialist realists in their early years. A conscious attempt at distancing themselves by an opposite aesthetic was likely to take place, even if it occurred some time after they were the most dedicated to the style. And yet, there was never an explicit formulation of aesthetic unfinalizability, no official grouping of artists with any kind of statement of purpose. It might not have been a conscious political attempt, but the dominance of unfinalizable plots, themes, and experimental forms can be retrospectively recognized, as can their critical political implications and their impact on their contemporary moment. Even if this aesthetic style was merely an artistic preference, entirely autotelic without any political intention, or a subconscious mechanical reaction to the times, works of aesthetic unfinalizability would still be considered antisocialist, since art that did not intend to promote Marxism was by definition counterpolitical. Sinyavsky described this phenomenon as the danger of “either/or reasoning.” In his plea, spoken while on trial for having written slanderous literature, he explains: “He who is not with us is against us. At certain periods—in revolution, war, or civil war—this logic may be right, but it is very dangerous in times of peace, when it is applied to literature.” Sinyavsky illustrates the slippery slope that leads from literary style to enemy of the state: “I am asked: ‘Where are your positive heroes? Ah, you haven’t got any! Ah, you are not a socialist! Ah, you are not a realist! Ah, you are not a Marxist! Ah you are a fantaisiste and an idealist, and you publish abroad into the bargain! Of course, you are a counterrevolutionary!’”²⁶ Sinyavsky illustrates that, by the logic of the court, there is no such thing as being an apolitical writer in the Soviet context.

Socialist realism taught its readers party loyalty and embodied Marxist ideology; its simple and straightforward plot progression mirrored teleological historical materialism.²⁷ By contrast, aesthetically unfinalizable texts—even those with straightforward and chronological plot progressions—led nowhere. They either lacked a direct relation to history or represented a different historiography. Unfinalizable works in Polish literature and cinema in the late socialist era broke away narratively from the conclusive plots offered by a socialist eschatological worldview, and in doing so they exemplified other, nonteleological beliefs about the future. Aesthetic unfinalizability thus departed from the theory of history invoked by socialist realism and, by implication, from the “strong closure and a mandatory happy or ‘constructive’ ending” that must necessarily

follow such linearity.²⁸ Of course such a climax was predictable, corresponding to the end of history and the radiant sunset that unfinalizability undermined, and the happy end was replaced by no end.

Morson jokingly refers to the formulaic plots and styles of socialist realism as being “as pre-fabricated as the factories their heroes construct.”²⁹ This elucidates unfinalizability’s second major departure from socialist realism: mocking its recurrent themes of construction. In aesthetically unfinalizable texts nothing can be achieved, and by extension any construction site is doomed to remain in that state. In socialist realism, factories and construction stand for the rebuilding of the postwar Soviet Union and, more generally, the forging of socialist ideology. In the Poland of the 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, literature and cinema connoted that neither republic nor idea could be built; monuments dedicated to socialist victories and to Soviet-Polish friendship are bold but inaccurate representations that illuminate the flawed nature of the ideas and events they are raised to commemorate. New constructions fall to ruin before they are finished and socialist cities are dissolute and labyrinthine, sharply contrasting with the communal spaces promised by propaganda. The (re)building of the Polish nation as the new People’s Republic of Poland (PRP) or *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* (PRL) was an impossibility; it would stand eternally unfinished if the goal were to reach any promised model. Wajda mocks the idea that the PRP is even a republic at all—it does not live up to the Roman definition or to any other notion of a republic: Laws are not respected, people’s voices are not heard, and it is not a *res publica* if it is not really a thing of the people. Konwicki attacks the propaganda of construction and common slogans such as “We are Building Socialism” or “We Have Built Socialism” by questioning when a “finished” Socialism can emerge or be recognized. The protagonist of his novel *A Minor Apocalypse* (*Mała apokalipsa*, 1978) witnesses a parade celebrating this final achievement, but this event takes place in an undefined time. Nobody knows the date, the year, or even what season it is. Fulfillment cannot be known. Furthermore, Konwicki argues, building is pointless in a place where everything constantly falls apart. His grim diegetic universes not only reject ideals, they are not even fit for growth: buildings collapse, cities remain in ruins, and monuments are weak and cannot represent big ideas.

But why would this particular reaction against socialist realist structures and goals emerge in Poland, where the mandatory style was enforced relatively briefly and far less forcefully than in the Soviet Union? Socialist realism was

not officially enforced in Poland until 1949, after which it lasted in its strongest form only until the end of 1955.³⁰ After this period, elements of socialist realist fashion remained in Polish literature (included both voluntarily and under pressure). It is worth considering again the loss of nation in the eighteenth century. The socialist period was not the first time Poles had experienced longing for freedom or false promises of a liberation to come. After all, shortly after the Polish regained their independence in 1918, they lost it again with the German and Soviet invasions in 1939. The subsequent liberation was led by the Soviet Red Army, not an independent Polish army. While Poland was a satellite state and never part of the Soviet Union, it was indeed a part of the Soviet empire under direct control from Moscow. Polish Socialism thus was in a sense another partition following World War II. Experiencing how great promises went nowhere was a cultural trait that had been in the making for generations in Poland. Rhetoric of building, eternity, and immortality had once meant something else: during Socialism building referred to the construction of a material and ideological socialist state, a century earlier building a Polish national identity had been a cultural agenda; the new idea of striving for an eternity of Communism was not so different from the more than 120 years of striving for an eternal Polish nation to come; and political rhetoric about the immortality of Soviet leaders and ideology had been preceded by the belief in the forthcoming resurrection of a new immortal Polish land to be.

IMMORTAL LEADERS AND THE ROADS THEY BUILD

A second trope that bore fundamental importance in the socialist context and in socialist realist aesthetics is the metaphor of the immortality of Socialism. Marxism was forever. In the socialist realist novel, the immortality of the communist idea prevailed even when the hero fell; while revolutionaries and positive heroes died for it, the Marxist idea was eternal, and communist leaders were granted metaphorical immortality as was ascribed to Stalin after his death. In March 1953 Polish television aired a news chronicle in tribute to the recently deceased Soviet leader. Over the course of twenty-seven minutes commemorating his death, the producers of this newsreel saw fit to mention five times that either Stalin or his ideas were in some way immortal. This immortality was visually illustrated by accompanying images of a statue of Stalin and

plans for Warsaw's new "Palace of Culture," a monumental building that would bear his name.³¹ Stalin, the man of steel, was to be eternally memorialized as both a marble figure and a prominent feature of the capital city's landscape. As the chronicle played on, Stalin appeared to continue living, depicted in a film-strip smiling and gazing, in the words of the narrator, "into the future with his eagle eyes."³²

Just like Communism, the (un)dead leader was meant to live eternally. While the cult of personality expired once the truth about Stalin's crimes was uncovered, belief in the immortality of the Marxist idea did not.³³ After Stalin was dead and buried, everlasting Communism remained a persistent assumption in political rhetoric. Furthermore, reverence for Lenin and his stated immortality continued to thrive prominently throughout the twentieth century, "Lenin lives!" was heard long after his death. In fact, after the cult of Stalin became undone, the Lenin cult reemerged, and this father of Soviet socialism constantly modeled the cult of personality for his later successors. Even after Stalin had been proved unworthy, Lenin was inherently a part of all the cults of personality that followed. As Nina Tumarkin explains, Lenin lived "within the context of the extravagant veneration of his 'worthy continuer.'"³⁴ And while Stalin's body was moved outside of the Kremlin walls, Lenin still rests in the Moscow Red Square mausoleum.³⁵ "Lenin lived!" long after his death.

In Poland the vicissitudes of leaders brought about shifts in the use of construction and immortality as political metaphors, a rhetorical strategy that was never as overpowering as it was at the same time in the Soviet Union. Bolesław Bierut was the Polish leader, first as president and later as general secretary of the Polish United Worker's Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza; PZPR) from 1948 to 1956, and his death remains the subject of much speculation—it occurred in Moscow shortly after Khrushchev's "Secret Speech." The significance of this time and place has prompted many questions: Was Bierut killed? And if so, by the Poles or by the Russians? Or did he commit suicide in the wake of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin? Soviet official sources state that he died from pneumonia, whereas Polish news reports name heart troubles as the cause.³⁶ Whatever the cause, postmortem attempts at cultivating a Bierut cult of personality, as during his life, were not particularly successful in part because he simply lacked a strong personality.³⁷ While immortality was a guiding theme in the eulogies and the news chronicles following his death and funeral, the notion was not extended to Bierut himself. Stalin and Lenin had to some de-

gree already dubbed themselves immortal through their choice of names: Stalin, the man of steel (from the Russian *stal'*), and Lenin, who in solidarity with the Lena River workers became Lenin and thus metaphorically took on the power to flow like water. Bierut had served under many different code names during the revolutionary years and settled finally on Bierut, which invoked neither the elements nor eternity.³⁸ “Bierut has died,” Poland’s head of state Aleksander Zawadzki proclaimed conclusively in his eulogy at the funeral, “but our party stands strong as a monolith!” While Bierut lacked natural links to eternity, PZPR did not. Immortality was reserved for the party and for “our People’s Republic,” which, as Zawadzki announced, “lives and multiplies.”³⁹

The televised Polish chronicle that followed the funeral recounted the nationwide three minutes of silence in Bierut’s honor: “for three minutes life died in Poland,” stated the announcer.⁴⁰ This claim was contrasted by simultaneous footage of images of the rebirth of Warsaw. Bierut, surrounded by workers and ruins in footage from 1945, shovels rubble in the old town; he inspects progress made at construction sites and pens the six-year plan to rebuild Warsaw. In the newsreel, it is the city that Bierut helped to build that lives.⁴¹ Although Bierut is dead, he had the power to resurrect Warsaw: “He stood with us and celebrated when Old Town was rebuilt and the heart of Warsaw beat again.” Unlike Lenin and Stalin, Bierut was not immortal, but he was a giver of life to the city and to the party he led.⁴²

Even the implied immortality of the party was upset, however, when resurrection was bestowed upon Władysław Gomułka, who had led Poland after the war until 1948 when he was ousted, arrested and imprisoned, and accused of rightist-nationalist deviation from Socialism. His plan for “the Polish Road to Socialism” had recognized cultural heritage and national specificity as crucial in socialist reform and thus went against Stalinist demands for uniformity. Like a phoenix from the ashes, however, he returned and became general secretary of the party after the death of Bierut and a brief tour of duty by Edward Ochab who was general secretary of the PZPR between March and December 1956. When Gomułka returned, it proved that even after disavowal of Stalin himself there was a way back to the top. His resurrection implied that it was he who was immortal, while the party was neither infallible nor immune to change. Gomułka reintroduced his idea of the uniquely Polish road, and while he insisted that the USSR and the PZPR had the same ideological goals and that the Polish road was simply the best way to further the Soviet socialist plan, the return of this

road metaphor came as a relief to many Poles. A road can be long and winding and much can happen along the way; detours can be taken, and side roads might be found. If Bierut's metaphorical construction work consisted of quickly rebuilding and simultaneously reforging a new Poland to escape the dust of war, Gomułka's work was to build a road. That road could be "as long as possible," in contrast to the Soviets' accelerated speeding toward their Marxist utopia.⁴³

Gomułka's road, as it turned out, led to the events of March 1968 and the following years: student protests against the government that were met by security forces and new repressions, a mass emigration following the ensuing anti-Semitic campaign in 1968, and the killing of forty workers by police forces upon their arrival at work in December 1970. This reprisal against workers protesting price increases led to public outrage and eventually to Gomułka's resignation. The people could then see that their actions led to positive outcomes as the newly appointed general secretary, Edward Gierek, was a popular replacement.⁴⁴ Gierek made massive changes to the country's economic plan, taking a bold step away from Gomułka's industrial development strategies.⁴⁵ As far as his place on the mortality-immortality continuum, Gierek was something new, described beyond this metaphor that had never successfully been applied to any former Polish leader and that appeared finally completely outdated when compared to Gierek's youthful image. Even though Gierek was in fact fifty-seven years old, already a member of the Politbureau of the Central Committee of the PZPR, and first secretary of the most important party organization in Katowice, he was consistently described as a fresh face, and at first he also represented the idea of a new beginning for the country at large. Protesters felt they had been heard because of his appointment, and the large foreign loans he brought in made his first few years in power a positive contrast in living standards compared to the effects of Gomułka's price hikes.⁴⁶ Using the language of construction, Gierek built a new party; his background was as a worker and he quickly declared that he and the Party were the same as the workers, made from the same clay.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Gierek made structural repairs. He was frequently referred to as a "technocrat," and his focus on expanding industry and building new factories made him the embodiment of reform. He did not promise a utopian vision at the end of the road.⁴⁸

This change in rhetoric led to a major shift in imagining the end; whereas Gomułka had promised a road to Socialism—a long and winding one, but one that would eventually take the country there—Gierek was not so sure where

the road would lead. And it is against the background of Gierek's uncertainty that the road toward the end of Socialism begins. The period that begins with Gierek's rule is marked by repeated actions of dissent that, when punished by the Party state, merely helped to establish even greater dissent. Furthermore, with the construction of a more organized and educated opposition, there was decreased fear among the oppositionists of reprisals or interventions from the Soviet Union. It is during this lengthy era of the end, or of the beginning of the end, that the unique preoccupation with non-endings and the "unfinalizable" emerges in Polish cinema.⁴⁹

THE BEGINNING OF CINEMATIC NON-ENDS

Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water* (*Noż w wodzie*, 1962) is one of the most significant cinematic examples of narrative irresolution, as the film ends famously with a car stopped at a fork in the road.⁵⁰ Wajda has described *Knife in the Water* as the end of the Polish Film School and something uniquely new in Polish cinema, and also as something completely un-Polish.⁵¹ The 1960s were a period when open endings defined other European cinemas. The experimental French New Wave questioned traditional narratives and conclusions. Yet it is not clear whether this wave ever truly reached Poland. Polish open endings, with the exception perhaps of *Knife in the Water*, seem dislocated from the experimental New Wave in France, a question that was explored in the recent exhibition "The Polish New Wave Project" and in its subsequent publication of the volume *Polish New Wave: The History of a Phenomenon that Never Existed*.⁵² Analyzing Polish auteurs such as Skolimowski, Królikiewicz, Piwowski, and Żuławski and genres ranging from documentary to drama, scholars today reach conflicting conclusions regarding the existence of Poland's place in this greater European movement. One reason to pause before placing Polish open endings alongside those of the French New Wave is to consider the effects that open endings could have in the Western and in the Eastern contexts and how they ultimately differ in essence. Paul Coates explains in his discussion of Polish film as art cinema that open endings were not only artistic in the Polish context, they were a "gift of freedom to the viewer." The openness was a place to fill in gaps, to read criticism that was only implied in the spoken. Open endings according to Coates

were “rooted” in the impossibility of saying certain things—to be motivated more politically than aesthetically.⁵³

Of course there were open-ended and experimental Polish films before 1970, and of course some offered direct possibilities to read criticism. Ambiguous endings as a trend, however, were not popularly picked up by Polish directors until the 1970s. And once they were, aesthetic unfinalizability went beyond mere ambivalence, embodying inconclusiveness on a much larger scale. The early years of the 1970s were an incipient moment for aesthetic unfinalizability, a time wherein art seemed to react directly against the political doctrine of the 1950s rather than political conditions of the 1960s. There was an artistic surge of deathlessness, narrative irresolution, and an overt preoccupation with the future as something unknown that could not possibly be predicted. As socialist promises were increasingly distrusted, so was any assumed finale of a story.

Andrzej Wajda’s production can exemplify how directors made openness a goal in the early 1970s in comparison to the 1960s. In 1970 Andrzej Wajda’s *Landscape after Battle* (*Krajobraz po bitwie*) was released. This adaptation of Tadeusz Borowski’s 1947 short story “Battle of Grunwald” (“Bitwa pod Grunwaldem”) begins with an end: the liberation of a German concentration camp after World War II. Prisoners are burning their old prison clothes, dancing, and tearing down barbed wire. As the plot unfolds, however, the introductory rush transforms into nonaction: the survivors are now displaced persons and are kept in the former SS barracks under the governance of American troops, still unable to leave. *Landscape after Battle* is not merely about an individual who is facing the new; rather, it is the status quo of the entire camp that is significant and is sarcastically played up.

Two years prior to the making of *Landscape after Battle*, Wajda’s *Everything for Sale* (*Wszystko na sprzedaż*, 1968), a film about the making of a film, was released. This eulogy to Wajda’s favorite actor—Zbigniew Cybulski, who died tragically in 1967—grows out of that loss and attempts to fill the void left by Cybulski. Konrad Eberhardt described the film’s rhythm as that of a chase, searching for the lost actor.⁵⁴ However, while the film does not manage to retrieve Cybulski, it does in a sense manage to replace him—Daniel Olbrychski, who takes the place of the dead actor in the film, became Wajda’s new favorite actor in many of his films to come. Two years later it was Olbrychski who played the protagonist Tadek in *Landscape after Battle*. This new face marked a change

in Wajda's cinema, but his films changed in deeper ways as well. The structure of *Everything for Sale* had been composed of loss, chase, and replacement—its ultimate takeaway was that the show must go on. In *Landscape after Battle*, instead, action was replaced by trepidation, and the paradigmatic historical moment, the liberation of the camp, is one of hesitation. This film bears similarities to Wajda's earlier *Ashes and Diamonds* (*Popiół i diament*, 1958), which also takes place on the last day of World War II and portrays the difficulty of returning to normalcy and adapting to the new Poland that awaits after the war. *Ashes and Diamonds*, however, ends dramatically and conclusively with the death of the protagonist (played by Cybulski), whereas *Landscape after Battle* ends with Tadek boarding a train. Where will he go and what kind of Poland will he face? We do not know. The fates of the two men after the war are thus radically different: one of certain death and one of an uncertain future. Although Tadek's train moves, his fate is as unknown as that of the couple in Polanski's stopped car.

Two years later, Wajda directed *The Wedding* (*Wesele*, 1972), an adaptation of a play by Stanisław Wyspiański that, written at the turn of the twentieth century, described the powerlessness experienced by the Poles while under partitions. The play is most often read as a call to arms, but Wyspiański himself stated that the play shows the Poles as unable to act.⁵⁵ This passivity is picked up by Wajda, who analyzes *The Wedding* as being about more contemporary inaction:

Who are you?—the author asks the wedding guests. And who were we in the free and powerful Poland of the past centuries? Can we win freedom for ourselves and for future generations? Can the Polish intelligentsia and artists lead the peasant masses, which are the only real social force in an economically and culturally backward country? Wyspiański doesn't not only ask, he also pronounces his verdict: you aren't mature enough for freedom, you just turn around in a cursed dance of stagnation and torpor. This is the meaning of the last scene of *The Wedding*.⁵⁶

Wajda had thus embarked on a trend of making films about failed endings and stillness. Krzysztof Zanussi, who came to prominence at around this same time, also played with themes of uncertainty already in his first few films. In the short three years following his debut *The Structure of Crystals* (*Struktura Kryształu*, 1969), Zanussi produced *Family Life* (*Życie rodzinne*, 1970), a one-hour film for television entitled *Next Door* (*Za ścianą*, 1971), and *Illumination*

(*Iluminacja*, 1972). These productions were all received enthusiastically, and he was immediately recognized for his unconventional style and for his talent.⁵⁷ Even Zanussi's thirty-minute diploma film, *Death of a Provincial* (*Śmierć prowincjała*, 1965), was unusually well publicized, praised both for its "unquestionable aesthetic and philosophical values" and for being "startlingly different from anything thus far produced at the [Łódź] film school or in the Polish cinema."⁵⁸ Yet its ambiguities were already pointing in the same direction as were Wajda's films from the early 1970s.

Next Door depicts Anna, a young unsuccessful biologist who reaches out for professional help (and in the hopes of finding a personal connection) to her neighbor Jan, an older colleague. Jan's superior status to Anna as a male senior professor is illustrated in his financial advantages that are made obvious when he describes the updates he has been able to afford in his apartment, and even though their apartments are of the same size Jan cannot shake the feeling that his apartment surely *must* be bigger. The film ultimately explores the loneliness of the characters who, despite being colleagues and neighbors, cannot develop a meaningful relationship because of their social circumstances. In the film, life in academia, in the socialist apartment complex, and ultimately in Poland at large is pervaded by the same inequalities, distances, and indifferences. These ideas are most prominently presented in Anna's failed suicide attempt. Not only does the film end on a note of un-completion, the film's final scene stresses the sense of uncertainty. Anna waters flowers on her balcony as Jan observes her from his apartment. Anna's wistful appearance and slow motions paired with Jan's concerned looks beg the question "what will happen next?" Will Anna attempt to take her own life again? Similarly to Polanski's stopped car, Anna appears to be at an emotional crossroads. Perhaps next time she will succeed, ponders the viewer.

Zanussi's debut *The Structure of Crystals* also leaves the protagonist off in a dissatisfied and ambiguous place. The frame of the film about the reunion of two old friends concerns Polish social realities. In spite of their shared educational background, Marek's and Jan's lives have taken radically different turns: Marek has just returned from the United States (his stint at Harvard is mentioned twice), and Jan lives in a small provincial town where he leads a quiet and happy life with no particular career ambitions. Their childish competitiveness guides the plot in ways that represent competing social interests. Quickly it becomes clear that Jan's life in the countryside divorced from academic ambitions

offers him great joy. By contrast, as the film unfolds, Marek's professional successes become undermined. In the end Marek leaves Jan and their philosophical discussions behind and returns to academia, with stern rules that appear in the film to be as cold as the winter landscape he watches in his car's rearview mirror. He is returning to his old known life, but the film asks what his life will be there now that he has experienced the alternative: Jan's calm satisfaction. Yet, in this film from the end of the 1960s we know where Marek is going; his leaving is simultaneously a return.

Following these films Zanussi found his greatest unfinalizable voice in directing *Illumination*, which practically amounts to a manifesto on the nature of time and how it works in film and in reality. Unlike the earlier films that offered emotionally ambiguous endings, *Illumination* is completely immersed in questions, even the experimental form alone plays with chronology, gaps in time, and indecisiveness. If Wajda's *Landscape after Battle* emphasized the hesitation of one historical moment, Zanussi's *Illumination* is a close reading of the constant wavering of one man and the arbitrariness of one life, shown in its entirety. The film ends abruptly without having reached any conclusion. It embodies unfinalizability on every level: its plot has no turns, its theme is the flowing and stopping of time, and it embodied temporal theories and quandaries in its form.

Konwicki's oeuvre also took a turn in the early 1970s as his film *How Far, How Near* (*Jak daleko stąd, jak blisko*, 1971) evolves into a great unfinalizable work following more ambiguous attempts at open endings. Konwicki's primary role in the unfolding of unfinalizability is his treatment of death as an ambiguous ending, if an ending at all (see Chapter 2). He had already flirted with this theme in his earlier works. His debut, *The Last Day of Summer* (*Ostatni dzień lata*, 1958) features a couple who meet one day on a beach. They talk about those they have lost in World War II in what turns into a slow-paced romantic drama. In the last scene the man is gone, his footsteps leading into the water. The sound of airplanes echoes off screen and connotes the army planes of World War II, and the footsteps in the sand symbolize the many men lost in that war. The man is gone and we do not know where, yet the film concerns a war that has already taken place and the lost young man symbolizes men already departed. In *Salto* (1965) a mysterious man shows up in a provincial town on the day after the end of World War II. The man who calls himself Kowalski-Malinowski claims to have lived in the small town before the war, and yet nobody remembers him. Who is this strange figure? Was he a fighter in World War II? Is he a conman? The most striking

scene in the film is that of a town gathering during which Kowalski-Malinowski directs the zombie-like inhabitants in a strange dance, “the salto.” This scene in particular lends the film to the possible reading that Kowalski-Malinowski is the devil and that all inhabitants of the town are not only sleepy but dead.

Two years later Konwicki’s novel *Ascension* (*Wniebowstąpienie*, 1967), which can be seen as a precursor to *How Far, How Near*, tells yet another story about a confused and confusing character who may or may not be dead.⁵⁹ In *Ascension* the hero wakes up with a fractured skull and amnesia. Without knowing who or where he is, he walks around Warsaw after dark, strangely drawn to the Stalinist Palace of Culture. Once there he climbs its thirty floors. Is this a story about a man who has suffered an accident and is subsequently wandering the streets of a dark city, or is it a depiction of a ghost who wakes up in a dead body? Is the ascension of the palace a literal climb wherein the man reaches only the top of a socialist paradise or is this a metaphorical climb to a religious heavenly afterlife?

While death and ghosts were already a prevailing theme in Konwicki’s work before the 1970s as exemplified in *The Last Day of Summer*, *Salto*, and *Ascension*, the film *How Far, How Near* moves beyond any ambiguity and the separation between dead and alive is clear while easily transgressed. In *How Far, How Near* characters are unquestionably dead, yet their lives are never-ending. Konwicki’s exploration of the simultaneity of life and death, past and present, endings and beginnings thus takes on a philosophical treatment of time similar to that in Zanussi’s *Illumination*; and such a conflation of opposites also defines Wojciech Has’s *The Hourglass Sanatorium*, where the protagonist’s attempts to keep his father alive culminate in the realization that he himself is dead, but in a world where death is a colorful spectacle defined by a perpetual reliving of life’s dearest moments. In *The Hourglass Sanatorium*, the hero wanders a circular set in what turns out to be a narratological spiral that leads eternally and repeatedly to a new beginning.

Alongside these and the many dramatic films that are the concern of this book, one remarkable comedy stands out. Movement that leads to nowhere is comically captured in Marek Piwowski’s *The Cruise* (*Rejs*, 1970). A man sneaks onboard a boat and then is mistaken for a party official; the river cruise that follows engages with the tropes of roads and endings in its depiction of a literal ship of fools. It is a riverboat adrift on an aimless journey. Polanski’s indecisive car can be said to have a direct correspondence in this later filmic means of transportation. Whereas, in 1962, *Knife in the Water* left viewers at an unknown



Where will they go? (*Knife in the Water*, 1962, Roman Polanski)

crossroads, however, in 1970, cinematic turning points were no longer merely mysterious; as in *The Cruise*, they were most definitely leading nowhere.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Although the 1970s mark a time in Polish history with somewhat relaxed censorship and increased liberties for artists, it was also a period of frequent riots, reduced wages accompanied by increased food prices, and a dramatic shortage of food, culminating in the 1980 strikes at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk. Workers put forth seemingly impossible demands such as the legalization of independent trade unions and, shockingly, won on every count, appearing to



Ship of fools (*The Cruise*, 1970, Marek Piwowski)

have gained control over their government. Furthermore, these strikes showed that something had changed from the previous revolts in the 1970s. There were no protests out in the streets and no attacks on politicians or political government buildings; instead, the workers organized committees and clearly stated their demands. Another key difference is that no violence was committed by the regime against the strikers. Both sides had learned important lessons, and the political climate and arena for conversation had significantly changed. The aftermath allowed for a less fearful era; a few months after the legalization of Solidarity, the trade union had eight million members. A third of the adult population had thus joined a group that had until recently been a forbidden underground organization. In 1980 the union reached ten million members, and Gierek was replaced by Stanisław Kania, who was in turn replaced shortly thereafter in 1981 by defense minister General Wojciech Jaruzelski.

Under his rule, fear and party order were reinstated through the imposition of martial law in December 1981. Six thousand Solidarity activists were ar-

rested, transportation and many factories were militarized, there were strict curfews, and tanks guarded the streets. Although martial law was lifted sixteen months later, many remained in prison until 1986, keeping the country in a constant state of tension. The Solidarity Union was banned, and it appeared that perhaps their great victory in the early 1980s had in fact been a loss. Returning to the trope of immortality in Polish politics, this was the moment of the return of the dead-and-buried Stalinism. One way to envision the changing political climate is through an old Soviet joke told by Timur Kuran in which Stalin leaves his political heirs two envelopes, one of which is labeled “In Case of Trouble.” Trouble arises and his heirs open the envelope to find a note that reads: “Blame me.” The second envelope is labeled “In Case of More Trouble,” and when more trouble occurs, Stalin’s heirs open it to find a note that says: “Do as I did.”⁶⁰ This joke epitomizes the constant balancing act of loosening and tightening repressions that followed for decades after Stalin’s death. After the complete disavowal of his regime, the leaders who succeeded him would often find no better approach than to mimic it. The televised tribute to the dead Soviet leader was right to assume that some lingering trace would persist—or at least remain readily at hand if needed. Martial law and the deep economic crisis of the late 1980s contributed to a general feeling of hopelessness for the people in PRP. Riots across Poland marked a country in crisis. These shifts in political life and experience were followed closely by shifts in art. Aesthetic unfinalizability remained but in a new form during the darker years of the 1980s. The changes were in tone, even if not exactly in theme. The unfinalizable films that concern death after 1981 still question its finality, but they do so without the wink of Konwicki’s *How Far, How Near* or *A Minor Apocalypse*. Playfulness turned dark after the introduction of martial law: Konwicki’s novel *Moonrise, Moonset* (*Wschody i zachody księżycy*, 1982) replaces the comical with true concern for the future; Zanussi’s Polish-German-French production *Imperative* (*Imperativ/Imperatyw*, 1982) represents the apex of Zanussi’s metaphysical angst, a film that completely emerges itself in anxiety, melancholia, and danger; and Kiesłowski’s *No End* and *A Short Film about Killing* (*Krótki film o zabijaniu*, 1988) are eerie and dark. Now death has become inescapable and brutal, even if it is still ultimately no more than a continuation of life.

The riots of the late 1980s eventually forced the leadership of the PZPR to initiate talks with the Solidarity opposition, and in February 1989 roundtable discussions were held that resulted in changes to the Polish constitution, the

most important being the restoration of the institutions of president and senate. The Sejm, Poland's lower parliament house, and the Senate combined were to elect the president, and although 65 percent of the Sejm seats would belong to the PZPR and its allies, 35 percent would be elected freely. Furthermore, a new version of the Solidarity Union was legalized. This first attempt at something resembling free elections gave Solidarity ninety-nine of the one hundred seats in the senate, and all available seats in the Sejm went to the citizen's committee that was backed by Solidarity. Perhaps most significant, there was no threat of reprisal from the Soviet Union. Gorbachev declared that Poland was free to make decisions concerning its own government, and Mazowiecki, the first noncommunist prime minister in communist Eastern Europe, even received a congratulatory telegram from Moscow.⁶¹

Unfinalizable texts had denied communist telos instead of predicting or hinting at its end, and when the fall of Socialism arrived it was met with surprise. As late as 1990, historian Martin Malia famously wrote (under the pseudonym "Z") about his disbelief in Gorbachev's Perestroika as an effective measure to reach democracy and market economy in Russia.⁶² Archie Brown confirms that the changes that awaited were unimaginable even right before they occurred.⁶³ In his scholarly work on the late Soviet period, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More*, Alexei Yurchak describes the shock in the Soviet Union. He quotes musician Andrei Makarevich's expression of surprise that the Soviet system could end: "It had never even occurred to me that in the Soviet Union anything could ever change. Let alone that it could disappear."⁶⁴ There was similar astonishment among the Poles during the free elections in June 1989 that finally rendered them a free democratic nation. In October 1988 Timothy Garton Ash reported from Poland and Hungary: there could be some changes in the region, he said hopefully, but he still stated with clear frustration that "We have been discussing the engines and brakes of the transition from Socialism. The conclusion is, alas, that even in Hungary, even in the Gorbachev era, the brakes look more powerful than the engines."⁶⁵ Even in August 1989, after the free elections in Poland, Ash wrote: "The changes in those countries are, to be sure, not yet 'revolutionary' in the sense of the storming of the Bastille. They continue to be what, in an earlier article, I called a 'refolution'—half-reform, half-revolution."⁶⁶

According to Polish economics scholar Ryszard Domański, this surprise took hold both within and outside of the country's borders: "Amazement and surprise

were the common reactions of Western political scientists to the fall of Communism; they did not foresee, nor could they explain, the collapse of the regime.” It seems that Western scholars and the Eastern European population alike were struck by this unexpected development in an area that everyone had assumed suffered from an eternal status quo: “no one had expected that the communist system, styled by some as totalitarian precisely because it was supposed to be immutable, would collapse suddenly and peacefully.” Following Hannah Arendt’s work on totalitarianism, Domański went on to write that “Communism weakens interpersonal bonds . . . and thus blocks the mobilization of anti-communist revolt.” The nature of the Polish and the Soviet systems should have rendered their populations unable to act together politically and mobilize—hence the feeling of surprise when the people did exactly that. Domański attempts to show that the idea of status quo was an illusion, and that the image of uninspired, demoralized Poles was false. He points to multiple revolts in Poland over the decades, also showing that both the Soviet and Polish governments were compelled to allow various exceptions for the church, for cultural movements, and eventually for individual freedoms. Refuting the surprise expressed by others, he suggests that “deductive reasoning always led to one proposition: ‘This system cannot work,’ and eventually it will collapse.”⁶⁷

And yet Domański’s voice of sober prediction is an exception among the many that expressed shock. As Kuran notes, it is always easy to see the signs of any historical revolt after the fact, yet revolutions forever continue to surprise us. The Polish underground poet and critic Stanisław Barańczak tells a story about the end of censorship that quickly followed after the free elections, specifically the first official publication in Polish of the selected poems of Joseph Brodsky. The book first came out in December 1989, though the censors had still made one small cut, the omission of the poem “The Berlin Wall Tune.” In spite of the dramatic changes happening around them at the time, the censors proclaimed that “this poem will never pass,” and that “it will be considered offensive and unfit to print as long as the Soviet Union exists.” The word “never” and the fall of the Soviet Union were still perceived as intimately connected, even at the dawn of Polish democracy. In the face of a reality in which they were surrounded by endings, the censors could not see that their role in Polish society was about to disappear. Barańczak points out that by the time Brodsky’s book was published the Berlin Wall had already come down, rendering the forbidden poem utterly harmless. He notes: “while on the whole, culture in those nations

played a major role in precipitating the recent political upheaval, the scope of this upheaval has gone far beyond culture's grasp." Barańczak wrote this article in 1990, and although he focused on the lack of insight of the censors, he himself fell into a similar trap when he wrote that "the rejection of the Stalinist system and the return to democracy, *if they endure*, will have a fundamental significance for culture."⁶⁸ Thus, even while criticizing the censors for their blindness to the changes around them, Barańczak himself was not fully convinced of the resiliency of those same changes. This attitude exemplifies the surprise and disbelief that Domański retrospectively claims was ill-founded; the story of Brodsky's poem, and Barańczak's telling of it, reveals that in the whirlwind of the end, people could not see the forest for the trees.

When the PRP was suddenly offered an end, artists did not automatically return to presocialist styles of narrating the nation as in a state of prologue. Again, unfinalizability shifted in tone in accordance with the political winds. Kieślowski's changes are perhaps the most striking at this moment. In both *The Double Life of Veronique* and *White (Blanc/Biały, 1994)*, the protagonists die (or, in the case of *White*, fake their deaths) only to be immediately replaced, either by the West or by life in the new, if still corrupt, Polish democracy (see Postlude). While many young filmmakers adapted to Western crisis modes and Hollywood formulas, historic cinema about the socialist period remains popular to this day. The old guard auteurs still tend to produce cinema concerning subjects from the communist era, and the end of socialist rule as a theme is conspicuously absent from contemporary cinema. The communist future has become a thing of the past, and yet judging from the silver screen one would never know—the nation appears to be unable to confess artistically that the end arrived. It appears as if aesthetic unfinalizability precluded not only the achievement of pure Communism but also its fall. After all, what is the opposite of teleology if not the eternal status quo? According to the logic of aesthetic unfinalizability, if no end is conceivable, then neither is political change; critiquing Communism's end had turned into a rejection of the end of Communism. While aesthetic unfinalizability may have begun as a political countermovement, today it has turned into an aesthetic continuation of the socialist ideology it originally mocked (see the Postlude). Long after 1989, Polish art has remained stuck in the middle.