

The Alien Tapes

They arrived here from another world. Though small-sized and unassuming in appearance, their cunning made them extremely effective. They took root in the early 1990s in abandoned, forgotten and ignored places. They crept up the walls in basements in blocks of flats, quickly converted garages or provisionally refurbished pavilions and annexes. Their presence could be felt in every housing estate. Above all, they patiently awaited their juvenile victims. Their gaudy, eye-catching packaging, often featuring incomprehensible and almost blasphemous-sounding inscriptions—*Transformers*, *Predator*, *Terminator*, *RoboCop*—concealed a magnetic tape with recorded messages from what seemed an alien civilization. They were snatchers of human bodies and minds. The video tapes.

Among the popular culture artefacts which fed the taste and imagination of the generation growing up in Poland in the 1990s, there was hardly an object more exciting to consume and simultaneously more effective in transmitting knowledge of the Western fashions and trends than the video tape. In the long term, the opening of the Polish market to Western imports caused video technology to be widely available. Poles were finally able to purchase the often long-desired VHS player in a broad price and quality range, from top-of-the-line devices from Sony, Panasonic and Phillips to GoldStar, Funai, Aiwa or Orion products.

Today, when “on-demand” content is available without time or space constraints, it may be difficult to understand how and why such an institution operated. However, in the 1990s, video rental shops performed a fully-fledged culture-building function, though the culture they engendered was not always recognized or desired. Renting out tapes required more than the few clicks needed today with streaming services. One had to enter a specific physical space while no algorithms generated suggestions what to watch. Instead, all you had to go on was intuition and the often laconic, albeit exaggeratedly creative and bombastic descriptions of films on the back of the boxes. Finally, it inadvertently elevated the status of the rental shop owner, who did not merely hand the tapes over to customers and took them back on return, but became an advisor, critic or guide, who recommended particular titles for one reason or another.

The most avid customers of local rentals—children and teenagers—frequently needed such assistance. In a fashion of their own, they were the most receptive to the plethora of names and titles on the rows and stacks of boxes. It was the young, often invisible witnesses to events, who most quickly began to distinguish films with Schwarzenegger from pictures with Stallone. As a result, they became the animators of video culture at home, whether in terms of viewing choices or the technical side of the screening. Today, we see that generation of underage video enthusiast as a group who built a completely new kind of social capital in the 1990s Poland. We may call it the pop-cultural capital. It prioritized an entirely new skillset and taste which, in the traditionalist approach, could not be defined otherwise than as consumerist, layabout and vulgarized. Still, the growing-up of those holders of pop-cultural capital was just another aspect of the Polish landscape of the 1990s, where the former social elite and the cultural canons they espoused clashed with the new middle class, emerging from systemic transformations and inspired by the sometimes unsophisticated repertoire of video rental shops.

At the time, I was a several-year-old compulsive patron of VHS rentals and I have to admit that, ultimately, the whole pleasure of being in such a place came down to one moment: the moment when I was able to stand in front of what then seemed a wall of videotapes reaching to the sky and immerse myself in the images that one box after another had to offer. The rental store would turn into a temple of distant civilization, the shelves were its altars and the box covers its frescoes. Although I wouldn't have been capable of such a comparison then, my peers and I must have felt like the human ancestors in the prologue to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, who gazed with apprehensive fascination at the black monolith which, in our case, was filled with tapes of the successive *Police Academies*.

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Thirty years ago, people watched movies on video tapes. The tapes were rarely bought—instead, they were rented from special places called rental stores. You had to go there to choose a movie. The rental store owner could tell you about the movies to help you decide which one to pick. Thirty years ago, young people were the quickest to learn which movies

to rent and how to play the tapes to watch a film. Renting and choosing video tapes was a very enjoyable experience.