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Dismantling the Faculty of Law

In Marysia Lewandowska's new film, everything is out of joint. It begins with the title. The words *the Faculty of Law* appear onscreen, only for another word to appear above them a few seconds later, letter by letter, as if being typed: *D i s m a n t l i n g*. The word itself suggests taking apart, but the gesture of adding it in this way actually implies the opposite: an interest in highlighting processes of construction – whether of a film, a law, or a life.

The first words we hear spoken in Polish by the film's female protagonist are: "I'm searching for a legislator, whoever that might be." A series of static shots guide us around a building, the Faculty of Law (Collegium Iuridicum) in Poznań. The building has a recognisable institutional grammar – corridors, numbered rooms, pinboards, signage, rows of index card drawers and so on – but it has the whiff of abandonment. The building is devoid of people and even the objects seem to vanish before our eyes, while the protagonist's voice echoes in the deserted rooms. As the camera moves around, it seems we are always just too early or too late to catch a glimpse of someone: doors swing closed, lightbulbs flicker to life, footsteps can be heard in a stairwell. Are we on the tail of the protagonist, or the legislator, or someone else entirely?

If the mysterious protagonist is in the position of searching, then so it seems are we. If we want to construct a narrative from *Dismantling the Faculty of Law*, then we need to look for ways to answer some further perplexing questions: Is the protagonist's search for someone (anyone) who can act as a legislator, or in fact a very particular person? Is this a story from the past or the future, or about law's ability to deliver justice? In Franz Kafka's famous parable 'Before the Law', the door to the law stands tantalisingly open but the person seeking admission is never allowed to enter. In *Dismantling the Faculty of Law*, things are otherwise: the seeker has apparently passed the threshold but the law is already elsewhere – and the seeker herself has also become elusive.

The grammar of inquiry, however, is always one of mistakes and interruptions – as we learn: "Who seeks must err, kiss the door handles, trip over commas, bravely endure the question marks, and sigh the ellipsis." The more times we watch *Dismantling the Faculty of Law*,

seeking for answers, the more we might begin to notice that this is a film defined by gaps and ellipses of all kinds: the space left by furniture as it is removed; the interval it takes for a lightbulb to flicker into life; the missing frames of a jump cut (people and objects suddenly disappearing); the distance of a voice from a body; or the abyss separating the law, in any given case, from the unique life to which it is applied.

These gaps, however, are not obstacles but invitations. As much as *Dismantling the Faculty of Law* clearly concerns particular political histories of the law in Poland, centred on this building, it seems to be asking us something much more fundamental: what does it mean to do justice to any story? The only way to dismantle the histories which the film presents us with, both personal and collective, may be to accept that we are already part of them – and to take on the responsibility of judging for ourselves.