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POLISH MODERNIZATION IN BIOGRAPHICAL FILMS OF THE 2010S

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Effecting lasting change was an important goal of Polish politics, economy and culture in postwar Poland, the Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, the PRL), when the country adopted state socialism. Postwar governments differentiated themselves from those ruling during the interbellum by its progressiveness and expressing the spirit of history, which, according to the classics of communist thought, moved from slavery to communism. With the passage of time, however, there was a growing sense that, rather than overtaking other countries, Poland was lagging behind, especially the West. This fact was, however, obfuscated by the rhetoric of Polish successes and continuous modernization.

The fall of state socialism which was, ultimately, caused by economic inefficiency, led to dismissing the modernizing efforts of the state and Polish people as misplaced, criminal or even absurd. This is reflected in the bulk of films about the period of state socialism, which focus on the crimes committed by the state against its own people. However, in the last decade or so several films were made which employ a different approach. While they do not glorify the communist system and its functionaries, they recognize that during the period of state socialism Poland underwent modernization, affecting the everyday lives of its citizens. This happened largely thanks to exceptional individuals who tried to make the most of state socialist environment. For this reason, these films, to which my article is devoted, *Bogowie* (*Gods*, 2014), directed by Łukasz Palkowski, *Sztuka kochania* (*The Art of Loving*, 2017), directed by Maria Sadowska and *Ostatnia rodzina* (*The Last Family*, 2017), directed by Jan P. Matuszyński, adopted the form of a biographical film. I will examine what type of modernization

is represented in them and how it is achieved – through cooperating with the communist authorities, subverting the political rulers or “doing one’s own thing”, irrespective of the political situation. I will do so by locating the films in two contexts: the discourse of Poland’s modernization and biographical film.

THE DISCOURSE OF MODERNIZATION

After the end of the Second World War, Poland, following the international treaties, joined the bloc of socialist countries, becoming a satellite of the Soviet Union. This resulted in aligning itself with the political and military goals of the Soviet Union, as well as adopting the economic principles of state socialism and attempting to create a new, socialist culture and a new type of person, whose main goal was to build socialism. These changes were not short of revolutionary and the new authorities emphasized the difference of the Polish socialist present with the interwar past, also in moralistic terms. The past was backward, unjust and lacking in ambition, the present was meant to be forward-looking, just and grand. Initially, it even looked this way, as Poland’s success of rebuilding after wartime devastation was impressive. Moreover, the authorities managed to overcome the problem which marred the interwar economy: unemployment and introduced welfare. However, despite the fact that the second postwar economic plan, the Six-Year Plan (1950–1955), was implemented under martial-like conditions, with hundreds of thousands of young, mostly poor, peasants uprooted from their village communities and moved to workers’ hostels at the industrial sites¹, its economic objectives were not achieved in full. The performance of the Polish economy during this period fell far below the results of not only capitalist countries but also its own results during the Three-Year Plan, preceding it². The relatively low production, especially of consumer goods, and the focus on heavy industry was reflected in the standard of living, which did not increase as much as people hoped. This led to widespread

¹ Łukowski, J. and Zawadzki, H. *A Concise History of Poland*, Third Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2019, p. 369.

² Koryś, P. “Idea nowoczesności w działaniach i planach partii komunistycznej w Polsce 1945–1980. Przegląd problematyki”, in Elżbieta Kościk and Tomasz Głowiński (eds), *Gospodarka i społeczeństwo w czasach PRL* (Wrocław: GAJT), 2007, p. 443.

social unrest, culminating in the Poznań riots in 1956. However, as Piotr Koryś argues, despite all these failures, the Six-Year-Plan achieved its main ideological objective: it eradicated from the social consciousness attachment to the market economy. "In 1956 Polish society consisted of workers, fighting for their rights in the framework of the socialist economy and intellectuals, fighting for socialism with a human face. It lacked those who contested the economic and political foundations of the socialist state"³. It was thus during the Six-Year Plan that the socialist man was born.

After 1956, the official line was that the main goals of socialism were achieved and what was needed was only to improve on them. At this point the discourse of modernization was born in Poland. It referred to many issues, such as technology, economy, culture, as well as everyday life. Both Party leaders, who gained power after 1956, Władysław Gomułka and Edward Gierek, promised to modernize their country, namely improve on what was good, but not perfect. This socialist modernization was meant to be a joint effort of the political authorities and ordinary people as in the slogan of Edward Gierek: "Pomożecie – Pomożemy" ("Will you help?" "We will"). However, contrary to the official propaganda that the situation is good and only needs improvement, as time passed, it became worse, leading to repeated crises, which resulted in overturning the system at the end of the 1980s. The problem was in the economic system itself. As Geoffrey Swain and Nigel Swain argue:

When Eastern European socialists confronted issues of economic organization, they were informed by two overriding, theoretically inspired principles: first, the market did not define value and some other measure was required for estimating social needs; second, the true calculus for quantifying and comparing value in a socialist economy was units of socially necessary labor time.

Unfortunately, as serious attempts to implement such an economy in the Soviet Union revealed, measuring value in terms of socially necessary labor time proved impossible to put into practice. No workable solution was found to two fundamental problems: how to compare manual and mental labor embodied in capital equipment and the research and development processes necessary to produce that equipment.... The answer was the Party. When

³ Ibidem p. 36.

faced with creating a socialist economic system in practice, if the market could not act as an arbiter of value, and a consistent hierarchy of values and needs did not simply emerge from society, what better replacement than the Party⁴.

Making the Party the arbiter of economic (or, indeed, all value) resulted in these enterprises winning, whose managers were able to persuade Party officials that they were worth investment and support, even if this wasn't the case and loss of those which had good economic plans, but didn't have the ear of the Party. In the longer run, the system based on the pressure exerted on the Party by persuasive manufacturers made Polish products not only uncompetitive internationally, but also expensive to produce. This was one of the economic paradoxes of state socialism: people earned little, yet they earned more than the value of the goods and services they produced. This was clear to French journalist, Danielle Hunbelle, who in the early 1960s travelled to Poland and noticed that Poles earned little, but equally worked little. To produce a Polish Warszawa car, 450 working hours were needed, while production of a Renault in Billancourt required only 60 hours. In the office half of the day was taken up by drinking tea and reading the newspaper. Polish industry was also marred by absenteeism, often used by the workers to earn extra income on the side, as well as theft of state property⁵.

Both Gomułka and Gierek understood the problem of low productivity and tried to overcome it. Gomułka did it by selectively developing certain industries, such as the chemical industry and rising prices of consumer goods, especially meat. This, however, led to social unrest, especially on the Baltic coast, which resulted in casualties and Gomułka losing political power. His successor, Gierek, faced with the same problem, tried to solve it by taking foreign credit, which was meant to play a double function: modernize the economy, which would allow Poland's highly-processed products to be sold abroad, and boost consumption. For this purpose, Poland also increased its exchange with the West, buying many licenses from countries such as

⁴ Swain, G. and Swain, N. *Eastern Europe since 1945* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan), 1993, pp.103–4.

⁵ Brzostek, B. „Robotnicy Paryża i Warszawy w połowie XX wieku”, 2006, pp. 23–24, in Jerzy Kochanowski (ed.), *Warszawa: W połowie drogi między Paryżem a Kijowem* (Warszawa: Trio), pp. 11–66. Łukowski, J. and Zawadzki, H. op. cit. p. 369.

France, as well as sending its specialists abroad to receive training. However, ultimately the plan failed, as the Polish economy under Gierek essentially followed the same rules as under Gomułka, with the Party remaining the main arbiter of value. Consequently, after about five years when the living standard increased, it decreased again, and Gierek tried to overcome the crisis in the same way as his predecessor, by increasing prices and sending the military to confront the striking workers. On this occasion, however, this approach did not work, leading to a long battle between the government and the opposition, represented by the Solidarity movement, which was, finally won by Solidarity, leading to the dismantling of the state socialist system at the end of the 1980s and introducing capitalism.

Although Polish attempts at modernization failed on a macro-scale, it does not mean that the entire postwar period was marked by backwardness and misery. Living standards were going up and there were many areas where Poles enjoyed individual and collective successes. This was especially the case in the first half of the 1970s, when the economic situation improved considerably and Poland's outlook became somewhat western⁶. Not surprisingly, these three films focus on this period, but rather than showing Polish achievements in economy and technology, which were rather negligible, they focus on achievements in improving the quality of life for Poles.

BIOGRAPHICAL FILMS

According to George Custen, “a biographical film is one that depicts the life of a historical person, past or present”⁷. Belén Vidal develops this concept, writing:

The term “biopic” is used to refer to a fiction film that deals with a figure whose existence is documented in history, and whose claims to fame or notoriety warrant the uniqueness of his or her story. Like other sub genres within the historical film, the biopic is underpinned by reenactment or, as Robert Burgoyne puts it, “the act of imaginative recreation that allows the spectator to imagine they are “witnessing again” the events of the past.”

⁶ Landau, Z. and Tomaszewski, J. *The Polish Economy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Croom Helm), 1985, pp. 293–94.

⁷ Custen, G.F. *Bio/pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 1992, p. 5.

Regardless of the audience's degree of prior knowledge about the subject portrayed, it is the fundamental link to historical fact that seals the generic contract between producers and audiences of biographical film fictions, with the attendant pleasures of recognition⁸.

Roy Shuker adds that biopic is a "biography presented as a film or television feature, but differing from a documentary in that it is aimed at a popular audience and will balance reliability and accuracy against other considerations and the need to entertain"⁹. These definitions suggest that at the "heart" of every biopic is a pact between the filmmakers and viewers that the film presents a real person. The authors (principally the scriptwriter and director) are permitted to take certain liberties and diverge from the historical truth for greater dramatic effect or to condense the story, but they should not undermine the overall impression that actor A plays the real person B. Biopics are also expected to reveal something important about the historical figure. Hence, for Custen, hiding the fact that the film is about a historical person precludes classifying a given film as a biopic. "In biopics", he writes, "real names are used... [This suggests] an openness to historical scrutiny and an attempt to present the film as the official story of a life"¹⁰. Polish critic and historian, Bolesław Michałek, in a short but perceptive article mentions three types of conflicts in which the protagonists of biopics are engaged: between their personal happiness and their call or mission, between their call and the external world and between the character and nature¹¹.

Western and especially Hollywood biopics tend to emphasize the exceptional qualities of their protagonists, as well as their conflict with the external world and misfortune, as opposed to the historical circumstances

⁸ Vidal, B. "Introduction: the biopic and its critical contexts", in Brown, T. and Vidal, B. (eds), *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (London: Routledge), 2014, p. 3.

⁹ Shuker, R. *Understanding Popular Music Culture*, fifth edition (London: Routledge), 2016, p. 148.

¹⁰ Custen, G.F., op. cit. p. 8.

¹¹ Michałek, B. *Ćwiczenia z anatomii kina* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe), 1976, pp. 18–23.

under which they developed their art¹². This is also an observation made by Michałek, based on watching western films, chiefly American, German, Austrian and French¹³. Griselda Pollock summarizes this approach as “psycho-biography” and mentions films about Vincent van Gogh as their model¹⁴. Ken Russell’s films about classical composers also perfectly fit this trend¹⁵. Pollock is critical of psycho-biographies and advocates a greater emphasis on the social, economic and political context in which the character operates, what can be regarded as a call to produce socio-biographies. Hollywood biopics are also marked by teleology. “Through a necessarily selective account of a life, often constructed at the end point through the framing structure of the flashback, linearity and factuality led to a “natural” collapse of the future into the past¹⁶”.

If we consider biopics made under the conditions of state socialism, we observe a different approach, as if the filmmakers responded to Pollock’s call to move away from psycho-biography into the realm of socio-biography. This is especially the case in films made during the hegemony of socialist realism, when filmmakers were required to focus on a typical man or woman. Yet, “typical” in this context does not mean “average”, as put by Georgii Malenkov:

The typical is not that which is encountered most often, but that which most persuasively expresses the essence of a given social force. From the Marxist-Leninist standpoint, the typical does not signify some sort of statistical mean... The typical is the vital sphere in which is manifested the party spirit of realistic art. The question of the typical is always a political question¹⁷.

¹² Pollock, G. “Artists, Mythologies and Media – Genius, Madness and Art History”, *Screen*, 3, 1980, pp. 57–96; Custen, G.F., op. cit.

¹³ Michałek, B., op. cit., pp. 18–19.

¹⁴ Pollock, G., op. cit.

¹⁵ Tibbets, J.C. *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2005, pp. 155–216.

¹⁶ Vidal, B., op.cit. p. 5

¹⁷ Quoted in Groys, B. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1992, pp. 51–52.

In practice, the typical character of socialist realist art was expected to be above average and synthesize the most salient aspects of his or her times, like a perfect prism, refracting significant features of the current political and social situation. He or she was also meant to show others a new direction either through military struggle or work, undertaken for the benefit of the collective. Such views were presented in the seminal book about biography in the Soviet Union, Rostislav Yureniev's *Soviet Biographical Film*, published in 1949. Its author suggested that the protagonist of a biopic should be a great man and progressive activist, whose achievements the audience would like to imitate. Furthermore, the screen biography should foreground the historical meaning of the work and life of the famous individual, and therefore its author should concentrate on their social dimension, at the expense of depicting his or her private life¹⁸. If we want to summarize the main difference between psycho-biography and socialist realist socio-biography, then we can say that in the former paradigm heroes create history, while in the latter history creates heroes. The focus on the typical and grand narrative also means that socialist realist socio-biographies were dismissive about details. Excessive preoccupation with factual detail led to the criticism of naturalism, which could be understood precisely as focusing on details at the expense of seeing a larger picture, what Polish communist official and writer, Włodzimierz Sokorski, described as a "soulless photograph of reality"¹⁹.

Different types of lives lend themselves to different types of biopics. Political leaders, be it Napoleon, Hitler or Stalin, are better presented in psycho-biographies, as we believe that these men shaped their times more than they were shaped by them. By contrast, biopics of ordinary people are more convincing as socio-biographies, because their influence on the direction of history is much smaller, and they influence it as a part of a collective, rather than individuals. Famous artists and scientists lend themselves to both types of biographies or, conversely, can be regarded as perfect material to synthesize both types.

While biopics flourished under socialist realism in Poland, both in terms of their quantity and the resources put into them, they declined in the subsequent period. In the second half of the 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s there are

¹⁸ Quoted in Toeplitz, J. "Młodość Chopina", *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, 5–6, 1952, p. 118.

¹⁹ Quoted in Tompkins 2013: 78.

few biographical films. This might reflect the polarization of Polish cinema between the auteurist films, epitomized by productions of the Polish School and the Cinema of the Moral Concern on one hand and popular films on the other, most importantly comedies and crime films. Biopics, being somewhat “serious” and “educational”, hence seen as tedious and pedestrian²⁰, did not come across as pure entertainment and, at the same time, did not fit comfortably with the idea of authorship, according to which the director ultimately expresses him/herself in the film rather than drawing on the life of somebody more important or famous.

THE CHANGING ATTITUDES TO THE COMMUNIST PAST

This attitude towards biopics started to change in the 1980s, with more Polish biopics seen in this decade, but the “flood” of biopics happened in the last two decades. This can be explained by filmmakers turning to genre cinema, as a way to be more receptive to the viewers’ demands and draw on their interest in the history of certain public personas, especially those whose life was eventful and tragic. However, as is always the case with cinema, it did not react immediately to this demand, but with a delay, caused by a need to secure financial backing for project development. Moreover, only when certain biopics proved successful, did more filmmakers decide to try their hand in them, following the rule (which summarizes the history of genre cinema) that success breeds success. The 2010s can be described as a decade of biopics, with twenty or so Polish films fitting this category²¹.

The turn to biopics can also be seen in the context of a change in attitude to the Polish “communist” past after 1989. After the fall of state socialism the modernizing efforts of the Polish state and its servants were either treated with derision as poorly thought-through or forgotten. The heroes of state socialism were those people who opposed the system, rather than those who succeeded despite the shoddiness of the environment, in which they operated. The institutions, which were set up to commemorate the past, especially

²⁰ Bingham, D. *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic As Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick, NJ Rutgers University Press), 2010, p. 11.

²¹ Staszczyszyn, B. “A Lust for Life: Making Sense of Biopic Cinema in Poland”, *Culture.pl*, 2017, <https://culture.pl/en/article/a-lust-for-life-making-sense-of-biopic-cinema-in-poland>, 29/06, accessed 17/10/2018.

Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (the Institute of National Remembrance) encouraged such black and white interpretation of the Polish past. However, the situation has changed in the course of time, when memory of the past started to fade and a new generation entered the social arena, who had no first-hand experience of state socialism. The former allowed for a more nostalgic and inquisitive attitude. This generation is less invested in the real or imaginary battles between bad communists and good anti-communists and more interested in the communist past as one of the roots of their cultural identity. The more positive attitude to the communist past can also be linked to a certain disillusionment with the West, which Poles now are more likely to know first-hand, thanks to increased immigration and emigration, and tourism. This does not mean that a condemning attitude towards the communist past disappeared. It still exists and dominates Polish cinema, but the three films chosen for my discussion offer an alternative.

GODS: MODERNIZATION AS EXERCISING RIGHT TO EXPERIMENTATION

The main character in *Gods* is Zbigniew Religa (1938–2009), a prominent Polish cardiac surgeon, who performed the first successful heart transplant in Poland, in 1985. The film shows his struggle to establish a team of specialists working on heart surgery and then his repeated attempts to transplant hearts, which lead to two patients dying shortly after the operation, before one patient survived several years. It also shows Religa's difficulty to reconcile his busy professional life with his private existence. In many ways this follows the scheme of a biographical film, in which the protagonist struggles for a significant time before he succeeds, as discussed earlier. This struggle allows us to get an insight into Polish politics and a way of living in the 1970s and 1980s, in a context of Polish attempts at modernization.

The film begins before Religa enters the stage, so to speak, showing the reaction to Jan Moll's first attempt at heart transplantation in Poland, in 1969, which was unsuccessful, leading to the death of his patient. We see the newspaper headlines stating that Moll killed a patient on the operating table and journalists and fellow doctors in a television studio attacking Moll for behaving irresponsibly. His response is that heart transplant was the only way to give the patient a chance of survival. Subsequently Moll plays a minor role in the film, chatting with Religa during a congress of heart specialists in

Poland, so we do not learn about his stature. It is worth mentioning that in 1967, Moll was the first surgeon in Poland to implant an artificial aortic valve and had achievements in treating pregnant women with heart problems. His innovations in cardiac surgery were recognized internationally. Moll benefitted from his travels to the West, in part thanks to a studentship of the Rockefeller Foundation, when he learnt about new methods of treating heart failures. Religa is presented as his heir, and his trajectory is similar to Moll's: learning in the West, to benefit his countrymen with this knowledge, developing it and adapting to Polish circumstances. This could be seen as an approach tacitly adopted by Gierek during his rule in the 1970s and even pertaining to Gierek himself, who learnt about advantages of socialism in Belgium and brought this knowledge back to Poland, to benefit the Party and his country.

Palkowski also points to the fact that Moll, despite being a talented, committed and well-meaning individual, is treated unfairly by the system. One wonders whether this is because of professional jealousy, or inertia and hostility to innovation, which were perennial problems of state socialism. We only get a partial answer to these questions when the action moves to Religa. We see him for the first time performing an operation on a patient who was brought by ambulance during his night duty. He does so without going through a normal chain of command and breaking some regulations, as well as literally breaking into a cupboard where there are tools to conduct the life-saving operation. Following it, he goes through a disciplinary hearing, but is cleared of the accusation of misconduct. He had another hearing after the next operation when a girl of about ten dies on the operating table; this is because the operation reveals a heart defect which was previously unknown to doctors. Again, he is cleared of malpractice, but the doctors, especially one of them, do not hide their unease with Religa. This unease results from their hostility to risk-taking, as one doctor suggests that it is better to let the dying patient enjoy an extra week of life than risking his death on the operating table. It is during such a hearing that Religa mentions heart transplant as a way to save lives of patients, who cannot be cured by any other method, such as the girl who died under his knife.

After Religa's boss tells him that he would never permit heart transplants in his hospital on ethical grounds, mentioning that in Poland "the heart is holy", he decides to leave Warsaw and move to Zabrze in Silesia, where he

is asked to lead a new clinic, specializing in heart diseases. The clinic proves to be a building undergoing renovation, with practically zero budget for resources. The only equipment Religa is promised are some beds for patients. The doctor, however, is not deterred, but tries to overcome the problems by taking advantage of personal contacts and enthusing his collaborators. He stalks a director of a coalmine, asking him for 3 million USD for his clinic, to which the man responds with laughter, only to be rebuffed by Religa, who points to the man's irregular breath, suggesting that soon he would face his own heart problems. Next Religa approaches, albeit reluctantly, a Party dignitary and this encounter proves more successful, as the Party boss promises to pay for the clinic out of the profit made from exporting coal from one of the mines. The surgeon's modus operandi is thus essentially the same as that which dominated under state socialism: putting pressure on those in charge of the resources, principally the Party. The strategy works, although with bumps. For example, at one point he learns that all resources were withdrawn from his clinic. This shows the volatility and ad-hoc nature of the economy of state socialism, where somebody's personal decision, which wasn't scrutinized, could destroy a large enterprise. Religa also engages his medical staff in preparing the operating theatres, including washing the floors, tiling the walls and installing doors. All this is done, it seems, out of pure idealism: a desire to help fellow citizens and push the boundary of science. Issues such as remuneration and promotion are bracketed off in the film. We only get hints that the doctors are not paid well, as demonstrated by the fact that they live in apartments in blocks, attached to their positions, and there are discussions about the danger of losing an apartment due to moving to a different part of the country.

Modernization, as presented in *Gods*, happens thanks to the commitment of talented and ambitious individuals and despite processes which are against them, most importantly a lack of any strategy tackling poor health of Poles, indifference, verging on disregard, towards exceptional success and innovation, as well as the volatility of Polish politics in the late socialist period. However, it also happens because people at the top of the political ladder are open to persuasion and, ultimately, are well-meaning. Such an approach blames the system and exonerates people, despite the fact that it is the people who sustain and dismantle the system, as poignantly demonstrated by the fact that in the 1980s the state socialist system collapsed due

to the rise of Solidarity. Meaningfully, the film barely mentions Solidarity, giving the impression that it was merely a background to the activities of the protagonist.

Literally, the background of Religa's work is grey-blue, bringing to mind the style of the Cinema of Moral Concern of the late 1970s-early 1980s, which pitted a well-meaning individual against the corrupt system and a collective of people resisting change. As in the Cinema of Moral Concern, we also see long corridors, walked fast by the protagonist, with the camera following him from behind. However, the films belonging to the Cinema of Moral Concern were pessimistic – the noble individual was defeated, to suggest that the system could not be changed. After the fall of state socialism we learnt that the system could be changed, hence the greater optimism in *Gods*. It is further increased by the fact that the people presented in the film, namely Religa and his collaborators, such as Marian Zembala and Andrzej Bochenek, did not disappear from the social arena, but played a major role in Polish politics and culture. Religa became a member of the Senate and Minister of Health. Marian Zembala became an MP and also Minister of Health. Religa and his colleagues thus represent the continuity between the old and new times, and show that Poland's successes after 1989 were built thanks to battles won by the talented people belonging to the previous generation.

Biographical films tend to use various authenticating techniques, to demonstrate the viewers that they are truthful to the lives and times which they represent. On this occasion Palkowski cast Religa's collaborators, Zembala and Bochenek, in small roles of members of the ethics committee, assessing Religa's conduct²². Their presence can also be regarded as adding to a sense of the continuity between the communist past and post-communist present.

THE ART OF LOVING: MODERNIZING FOR PLEASURE

The Art of Loving presents the life of Michalina Wisłocka, Polish gynecologist, sexologist and author of the bestselling book *The Art of Loving*,

²² Łysakowska-Trzoss, A. "Bogowie – reż. Łukasz Palkowski – recenzja i ocena filmu", *histmag.org*, 11 March, 2014, <https://histmag.org/Bogowie-rez.-Lukasz-Palkowski-recenzja-filmu-10237>, accessed 14/05/2021.

published in 1978. The film centers on the 1970s, when she was trying to publish her by then controversial book. The rest of the story, which begins in 1939, is told in flashbacks. The flashback shows her meeting with Stanisław Wisłocki, with whom she fell in love at first sight and whom she subsequently married, her work at a German institute working on a vaccine against typhus, feeding lice, during the war and living in a triangle with her best friend, Wanda. When the flashbacks take us to the 1950s, we accompany Wisłocka in her struggle to establish herself as a female doctor in a world, dominated by men. She gets a position in a hospital in Białystok in the east of Poland, where she works on women's sexual health, but her work is dismissed by her older male boss on the grounds that it is not a priority for the state. If she worked on heart problems, it would be different. She is also undermined on the grounds that as somebody who has to commute from Warsaw and juggle academic pursuits with bringing up two children, she won't be able to work to the required standard.

Elżbieta Durys, who discusses *The Art of Loving* in the context of cinema of national remembrance (kino pamięci narodowej), a series of films produced in the aftermath of the fall of state socialism in Poland, which includes a large number of biographical films, points to the difference between Sadowska's approach and that of her mainly male colleagues, who made films about Poland's communist past. Other biographical films, such as *General Nil* (*General Nil*, 2009), directed by Ryszard Bugajski, present the life of the exceptional character as a struggle with the immoral communist system, which murders innocent people²³. In these films, the fight to overturn the system happens publicly. Wisłocka's struggle, by contrast, comes across as private. For example, in the 1940s and 1950s, she suffers because her "husband cheats on her with other women, rather than because her homeland is under the Stalin's boot" (ibid.). Durys sees it as a sign that *The Art of Loving* belongs to the feminist cinema with its focus on micro-history and the lives of women affected by grand history rather than shaping it (ibid.). Without dismissing this interpretation, I suggest that the difference between the cinema of national remembrance and Sadowska's movie also pertains to the heroine's approach to the political system. The male heroes of

²³ Durys, E. "W nurcie polskiego kina kobiet: *Sztuka kochania* Marii Sadowskiej", *Pleograf*, 3, 2019.

cinema of national remembrance tried to overturn the communist system. Wisłocka, by contrast, tries to work with the system and improve it, so that it better serves ordinary people and herself. In this respect, she is similar to Religa, as depicted in *Gods*. Both films include several scenes, in which the main character visits some Party dignitaries, who dismiss them on the grounds that their work is of little importance to the socialist state or does not agree with its ideology. Their response is that it is important to wellbeing and even the survival of society. Without healthy hearts, people's lives would be shorter; without happy sex and good sexual education, fewer children would be conceived and born, and many women would die due to botched abortions. Although their arguments are dismissed, they keep returning, like stalkers, trying to catch people in a position of power in a semi-private space, for example when they are leaving their office or (as in the case of Wisłocka) entering the backroom, where they have extramarital sex. They also rely heavily on the typical socialist way of arranging things, namely through personal connections and nepotism, what was known as *contacts* (*znajomości*). Both characters thus tacitly accept the rules of the system.

Sadowska, however, more than Palkowski, points to certain specificities of the 1970s, namely dissipation of political power, following Gierek's pragmatic approach to economics, his conciliatory stance towards the Church and the signing of the Helsinki Accords, and greater freedom of expression, enjoyed by the Poles in this period. This is revealed in an episode when Wisłocka tries to get her book published and is advised by a Party dignitary to go to the Church hierarchy and the high-ranking priest tells her to go to the third pillar of power – the media. She follows this advice and it eventually works – she manages to publish her book in installments in a women's magazine, despite not having the "Party blessing" at this point. Publishing her book this way also allows her to extend her circle of friends who have the right connections, mostly wives of Party apparatchiks, Army officers, the secret service and the civil service. It is their joint effort that *The Art of Loving* is eventually published without the excessive intervention of censorship, most importantly cutting out the chapter devoted to women's orgasm, which is regarded as most controversial by its male readers. This way of operating is presented by Sadowska as a sign of Wisłocka's nonconformity and bravery and we have to admire the female doctor's faith in her project. Nevertheless, her way of operating is straight from the "socialist playbook",

namely approaching people in positions of power directly, exerting the maximum pressure on them, rather than participating in a competition demonstrating that one's project is better than the alternative project.

Wiśłocka's connection with the project of modernization consists largely of emphasizing pleasure in sexual life, as opposed to having sex solely for procreation. In this way, as Durys argues, there is a similarity between her project and the western counter-culture of the 1960s (*ibid.*). It can be even argued that Wiśłocka was ahead of her time, because she started to engage in free sex already in the 1940s. She is aware of her avant-garde position, saying at some stage that "I'm not in favor of sexual revolution – I am the sexual revolution".

Wiśłocka's sense of being an embodiment of revolution is expressed through her clothes. Whilst at the beginning of the story she dresses in a rather conventional way, often sporting white shirts and pencil skirts, subsequently she changes her attire into bright patterned dresses. Such dresses were often made from curtains and table-cloths and on one occasion, when she visits an editorial office, we see the female doctor asking her host whether she can take the tablecloth and in a following scene we see her attending a party in a dress made from this tablecloth. But it is not only Wiśłocka who has an individual style in clothes. Practically all women whom we see in the contemporary part of the film, look elegant, undermining the idea that state socialism was about drabness and uniformity.

Both Wiśłocka and Religa move away from the Stalinist mindset, which prioritizes the collective over the individual. However, in the case of Wiśłocka, the shift from caring for the country as a whole to caring for an individual is more pronounced. For Religa, the goal of his work is as much saving individual lives as scientific progress and proving himself as a skillful surgeon who is able to conduct a complicated operation without making mistakes. Wiśłocka also begins her cinematic life as somebody with scientific ambitions. She mentions that she would like to create with her biologist husband a couple similar to Maria Skłodowska and Pierre Curie. Later, however, when she is effectively dismissed from her research at the Białystok University, she loses interest in advancing research. Her priority becomes helping her patients. She prefers to spend time with them, advising on their biology and the best way to achieve orgasm. She is treated as a celebrity by her patients, initially women, but subsequently also men, who

come to understand that their happiness depends on the sexual contentment of their partners. Her writing and publishing of *The Art of Loving* is an extension of this personal work.

THE LAST FAMILY: THE END OF POLISH COMMUNIST MODERNIZATION

The bulk of protagonists of biopics about people engaged in the music business are singers and frontmen of rock bands. *The Last Family* is an exception, as one of its main characters is Tomasz Beksiński, a well-known Polish music journalist, who committed suicide in 1999, at the age of 41. Beksiński started working in the radio in the early 1980s. He is known mostly for presenting his own programs: *Romantycy muzyki rockowej* (Rock Romantics), and *Wieczór płytowy* (An Evening with a Record). In them, he familiarized the listeners with British rock, both its classics of the late 1960s and 1970s and more modern music, post-punk and synth-pop, represented by bands such as the Cure, Depeche Mode and Ultravox. The title of his program, *Rock Romantics*, refers both to the romanticism in rock and to the new romantic style, fashionable in the 1980s. Beksiński was also the translator of dialogues in English-speaking films, most importantly *James Bond* and *Monty Python* and wrote English lyrics to songs by Polish bands, such as Omni. Beksiński's contribution to Polish modernization thus consists largely of bringing western culture to Polish houses and translating it, literally and metaphorically, namely making it suitable to Polish sensibility. Despite his successes, including being regarded as a cult personality of the Polish radio, Beksiński suffered from depression and was known for being fascinated by death. He tried to commit suicide several times, before finally succeeding on Christmas Eve 1999, just days before the end of the first decade of "free Poland" and the millennium.

Although Tomasz Beksiński is an interesting personality with a significant contribution to Polish music journalism, he would most likely not receive the honor of being the protagonist of a biopic, if not for the fact that he was the son of a man more famous than himself – the painter Zdzisław Beksiński, one of the most renowned Polish artists of the twentieth century. He specialized in painting skeletons and emasculated bodies with naturalistic precision, often against landscapes of plants with overgrown roots which look like animals or deserted cities, as if remnants of a war or

apocalypse. Beksiński, who started his career as a photographer and was also interested in reproduction technologies, in the last stage of life became also involved in computer graphics. Beksiński's work is not only widely admired by ordinary art-lovers, but also inspires other artists. In Poland, his paintings influenced the creators of the point-and-click adventure video game *Tormentum*. The noted Mexican film-maker Guillermo del Toro is also an admirer of Beksiński's works²⁴.

The film begins in 1976, when the entire Beksiński family, consisting of Zdzisław, his wife Zofia, their son Tomasz and his two grandmothers, moves from Sanok in the South of Poland to Warsaw, to a newly built housing estate Służew nad Dolinką. They move into a rather spacious, albeit standardized apartment in a block, with a small, smelly and vandalized lift. From their block they have a view onto an identical looking block. Although they were uprooted, the parents and grandmothers seem not to mind the change and get on with their new life. Zdzisław immediately takes over one room to use as a studio. It becomes filled with books, records and huge tape recorders, which in due course give way to more advanced equipment.

The Beksiński's family is in some way traditional – the father is the breadwinner and the mother looks after the household and the elderly women. Tomasz adopts a role of a rebellious son, except that he has little to rebel against, as he is a loved and pampered child, whose parents try to help him in any possible way. In between his rebellions, which often take the form of a suicide attempt, he is shown at his work as a music presenter and DJ, introducing the audience to contemporary English pop-rock. This focus might reflect Tomasz Beksiński's taste, but also his elevated position as somebody with access to expensive records, to which the film alludes on several occasions. This collection was acquired largely thanks to his father who, when selling his paintings abroad, demanded that, instead of money, he was paid in records. Off-screen, Tomasz Beksiński was known for generously lending his records to fellow music journalists.

²⁴ Blair, J. "The Tragic Story of Zdzisław Beksiński, the Artist Who Inspired Guillermo del Toro", *Culture Trip*, 10 June, 2018, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/poland/articles/the-tragic-story-of-zdzislaw-beksinski-the-artist-who-inspired-guillermo-del-toro/>, accessed 23/11/2020.

The exchange of Beksiński's paintings for records and presumably also music equipment can be seen as a realization of Gierek's ideal of modernization, in which Poles exchanged their unique talent for an abundance of consumer goods. Such an exchange was rare in reality; Poles rarely sold "highly processed products" in the 1970s and 1980s. The norm was selling raw industrial material such as coal and agricultural products and buying sophisticated machines or licenses to produce more advanced goods. Despite the contrast between Zdzisław Beksiński's national and international successes, and his modest and standardized abode, he does not feel exploited or oppressed. He is most remarkable for his lust for life, down-to-earth attitude to his career and fame, and acceptance of fate, contrasting with the morbid figures he paints. His appetite for life is revealed most poignantly in a scene where he eats his dinner, licking the bowl in appreciation of the food his wife had prepared for him. By contrast, Tomasz is seen complaining about food, even throwing it away and making havoc in a kitchen, just to show his temper. Zdzisław Beksiński also does not mind the landscape outside, most likely because he paints from his imagination. At one point he says that one shouldn't expect anything from life – every pleasure or reward should be taken as a bonus.

Despite focusing on the individual's fate and probably having no ambition to create a metaphor, *The Last Family* is remarkable for capturing the lifestyle of the Polish intelligentsia. It shows that despite living in a standard block made from prefabricated material, which in due course Václav Havel would contemptuously describe as "rabbit hutches"²⁵, the Beksińskis managed to have access to world culture and the most advanced technology. Moreover, the film suggests that standardization and anonymity of their habitat actually acted as a protection, at least for the father. Of course, the Beksińskis can be regarded as an extreme case, as an average Polish intelligentsia family did not include a famous painter, yet the observations are still valid.

The culturally rich family which is slowly shrinking and dying without producing an heir, can be regarded as capturing the fate of the Polish nation after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when many Poles emigrated to the West and the intelligentsia lost its privileged position, giving way to

²⁵ Sayer, D. *Prague: Crossroads of Europe* (London: Reaktion Books), 2018, p. 161.

a more entrepreneurial “middle class”. Such a shift did not substantially change the status of those at the very top of the cultural hierarchy, such as Zdzisław Beksiński, possibly even enhanced it, because nowadays the work of Beksiński is validated both by public appreciation and by the free market, where his paintings sell for tens of thousands of dollars. However, it negatively affected many other professions, such as music producers and journalists, due to their democratization facilitated by the internet and social media. Given that the virtual space is potentially unlimited, anybody can release a record, get hold of new music from across the world, or write a music blog. In Eastern Europe the gap between the old and the new status of music journalists has been particularly large. This is due to the fact that in the PRL possessing a large collection of records and knowing English well, two conditions which needed to be fulfilled to become a presenter on radio programs such those fronted by Tomasz Beksiński, were much more difficult to fulfill than in the West.

This sense of the actual or approaching loss of status and the obsolescence of one's work is captured in both *The Last Family*, by showing Tomasz Beksiński's huge collection of CDs and DVDs with foreign films and music. Inevitably, since his death, they lost practically all their value, becoming the detritus of a by-gone area, when western products had inflated value for Poles, but also when technology did not become obsolete as fast as these days.

POPULAR AND CRITICAL RECEPTION

The three films discussed in this article did very well in the box office and received numerous awards at festivals of Polish films. *Gods* was the most rewarded film at the 2014 Film Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia. It received the Festival's Grand Prix, the Golden Lions, as well as awards for best script, best male part, as well as an award for the most applauded film, suggesting that on this occasion the jury was in tune with the ordinary audience. The film also did well among the Polish diaspora, receiving an award at the Festival of Polish Films in Chicago. *The Art of Loving* received fewer awards and nominations for awards, still overall did well in this respect and, again, pointed to the convergence of the taste of the specialist and ordinary viewers, given that among these awards was an award was “Diamond Ticket”, an award given by the association of Polish cinemas for the most watched Polish film in 2017. *The Last Family*, in common with *Gods*, received the

Grand Prix at the Gdynia Festival, as well as the journalists' awards and the audience's awards. This is also a film which attracted a number of awards at the international film festivals and Polish diaspora film festivals.

The reviews of these films are also overwhelmingly positive. There are many aspects of them which were praised, such as the acting, cinematography and skillful use of genre conventions. Authors of all reviews which I have read highlighted that the PRL (re)created in these films feels authentic²⁶. Critics also praised filmmakers' moving away from the black and white vision of Polish state socialism, in which ordinary people were victims of inhumane systems and the best people were martyrs, who sacrificed themselves at the altar of fight against the system. Instead, they noticed that they focused on "everdayness" of everyday life and the protagonists' ability to make the most of their circumstances and achieve their goal, as is the case in (American) genre films. For example, Jakub Popielecki writes that *Gods* tells the story from the perspective of a "specific problem, which needs to be solved. The guy tries to reach a specific goal and we root for him. And this is enough [to enjoy the film]"²⁷. Dawid Wajda in *The Art of Loving* mentions, slightly jokingly and probably taking issue with the socialist idea about the importance of the masses in creating history, that it is the "individuals, who have changed the course of history and influenced generations"²⁸. Another reviewer of this film even goes as far as to suggest that the film is

²⁶ Łysakowska-Trzoss, A. op. cit.; Popielecki, J. "Serce rośnie", *Filmweb.pl*, 2014, <https://www.filmweb.pl/reviews/recenzja-filmu-Bogowie-16382>, accessed 4/02/2021; Popielecki, J. "Serce rośnie", *Filmweb.pl*, 2016, <https://www.filmweb.pl/reviews/recenzja-filmu-Bogowie-16382>, accessed 4/02/2021; Kilijanek, M. "Z wizytą u Beksińskich – Jan P. Matuszyński – Ostatnia rodzina [Recenzja]", *Głos Kultury*, 10 October, 2016, <https://www.gloskultury.pl/ostatnia-rodzina-recenzja/>, accessed 3/02/2021; Osmólska, K. "O tych rzeczach...", *Filmweb.pl*, 2018, <https://www.filmweb.pl/reviews/recenzja-filmu-Sztuka+kochania+Historia+Michaliny+Wis%C5%82ockiej-19756>, accessed 7/02/2021; Wajda, D. "Recenzja filmu *Sztuka kochania* (2017)", *moviesroom.pl*, 26 May, 2018, <https://moviesroom.pl/recenzje/powrot-do-przeszlosci/recenzja-filmu-sztuka-kochania-201>, accessed 3/02/2022.; Szczesiak, A. (no date). "Recenzja filmu *Bogowie*", *Gildia.pl*, <https://www.film.gildia.pl/filmy/bogowie/recenzja-bogowie>, accessed 7/02/2022.

²⁷ Popielecki, J., 2014, op. cit.

²⁸ Wajda, D. op. cit.

“in these times of a conservative counter-revolution a “political statement about women’s freedom and sexuality²⁹”, suggesting that women in the PRL had more freedom about their bodies than at the time the film was made. Critics appraising *The Last Family* pointed to the insight into family life, which is simultaneously dysfunctional, yet functioning³⁰. All these voices point to a need to make films about everyday life in the PRL and even to a certain pride in this period, suggesting that biographical film of those who excelled in other areas than politics is a perfect vehicle to achieve these goals.

CONCLUSIONS

The three films present modernization in Poland in the fields of medicine, social life, culture and art, which took place in the 1970s and the 1980s, what can be termed the late period of state socialism. They demonstrate that this modernization was possible thanks to the flexibility of the state socialist system in this period, namely accepting, even if reluctantly, new ideas on one hand and people with these ideas, willing to cooperate with the state, even, again, reluctantly, on the other. They also point to Poland’s openness to the West, as demonstrated by the inclusion of characters who studied and worked there, and brought their knowledge back to Poland, as well as Poland’s matching the West in some respects. Indirectly, these films point to the continuity between the communist past and post-communist present and the debt those who live under the new system owe to these modernizers of the 1970s and 1980s.

All these films use conventions of biographical film to show how Poland modernized itself. The advantage of employing this genre is twofold. On one hand, it furnishes the films with an exciting protagonist, whose trials and tribulations we follow, wishing him or her to achieve their goal. This is especially the case of *Gods* and *The Art of Loving*, which have such heroic protagonists, able to overcome obstacles, resulting. On the other hand, biographical film, focusing on non-political figures, allows us an insight

²⁹ Kyzioł, A. “Seks i inne demony. Recenzja filmu: Sztuka kochania. Historia Michaliny Wisłockiej”, reż. Maria Sadowska”, *Polityka*, 24 January, 2017, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/film/1691114,1,recenzja-filmu-sztuka-kochania-historia-michaliny-wislockiej-rez-maria-sadowska.read>, accessed 2/02/2022.

³⁰ Kilijanek, M., op. cit.

into ordinary life in the PRL, which was far from glorious, but neither was it dystopian. The positive reaction to these films, as measured in box office success, festival awards and favorable reviews, point to an appetite for such representations.

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Abstract

This article examines representation of the state socialist past in three Polish biographical films, made in the 2010s, *Bogowie* (*Gods*, 2014), directed by Łukasz Palkowski, *Sztuka kochania* (*The Art of Loving*, 2017), directed by Maria Sadowska and *Ostatnia rodzina* (*The Last Family*, 2017), directed by Jan P. Matuszyński. It argues that in them Poland is represented as a country trying to modernize itself and investigates how this modernization is achieved. It does so by locating these films in two contexts: the discourse of Poland's modernization and biographical film.

Keywords: Polish biographical film; state socialism; modernization; *Bogowie* (*Gods*, 2014), directed by Łukasz Palkowski; *Sztuka kochania* (*The Art of Loving*, 2017), directed by Maria Sadowska; *Ostatnia rodzina* (*The Last Family*, 2017), directed by Jan P. Matuszyński

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