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'Liberated Women' of the PRL in *Sztuka kochania* (*The Art of Loving*) and *Bo we mnie jest seks* (*Autumn Girl*)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines two contemporary Polish films, *Sztuka kochania* (*The Art of Loving*, 2017), directed by Maria Sadowska and *Bo we mnie jest seks* (*Autumn Girl*, 2021), directed by Katarzyna Klimkiewicz. Each depicts a famous Polish woman, namely Michalina Wisłocka and Kalina Jędrusik, each of whom made a mark on the period of state socialism (the time of the Polish People's Republic), projecting an image of a modern, liberated woman. It tries to establish how their portrayal reflects, on one hand, the social changes that took place in Poland after the end of Stalinism, especially in the 1960s, and, on the other hand, the current discourse of women and femininity in Poland, on the other. It also examines how emancipation was entangled with social class, arguing that the relative freedom these feminist icons enjoyed reflected their relatively high social class. My investigation is informed by the concept of 'modernisation' and a 'modern woman,' as understood in the West and in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s.

KEYWORDS

Sztuka kochania (*The Art of Loving*); *Bo we mnie jest seks* (*Autumn Girl*); Maria Sadowska; Katarzyna Klimkiewicz; biopic; Polish cinema

The last 20 years or so saw a surge of Polish biographical films and television series.¹ While at the beginning of this cycle of biographical films, political figures prevailed, fitting the concept of the 'cinema of national remembrance',² subsequently, there was a shift towards micro-histories and people whose achievements were in the fields of art and science.³ This group includes several women: Maria Skłodowska-Curie, Michalina Wisłocka, Agnieszka Osiecka and Kalina Jędrusik. In this article, I would like to focus on films about Wisłocka and Jędrusik, respectively *Sztuka kochania* (*The Art of Loving*, 2017), directed by Maria Sadowska, and *Bo we mnie jest seks* (*Autumn Girl*, 2021), directed by Katarzyna Klimkiewicz. This is because their characters made a mark on the period of state socialism (the time of the Polish People's Republic, Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, hereafter the PRL), projecting an image of a modern, liberated woman.⁴ Both films also draw attention to the importance of sex in daily life, especially in those of women. I want to find out how Wisłocka and Jędrusik are depicted in these two films and, especially, whether they come across as emancipated, and how their portrayal reflects on one hand the social changes that took

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place in Poland after the end of Stalinism, especially in the 1960s, and the current discourse of women and femininity in Poland, on the other.

My investigation is informed by the concept of 'modernisation' and a 'modern woman', as was understood in the West and in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s. For this purpose, I draw on the collection of essays by Edgar Morin, *L'Esprit du temps* (*The Spirit of Time*), published in Polish in 1965,⁵ which points to the profound changes that happened in the 1960s in France, and to Polish sources that trace the changes in the ideology and position of Polish women during the period of state socialism.

The Promotion of Female Values or the Return of Patriarchy?

Marxist thinkers, including Marx and Engels, devoted much of their writings to the suffering of workers, both men and women, due to the alienated character of their labour under capitalism. However, they also claimed that in the case of bourgeois women, the lack of paid employment did not work for their advantage, because it rendered them economically dependent on men and led to their subservient position within the family and society. For example, in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes: 'In the approach to woman as the spoil and the handmaid of communal lust is expressed the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself, for the secret of this approach has its unambiguous, decisive, plain and undisguised expression in the relation of man to woman ...'.⁶ In other places, Marx talks about women's work in factories being poorly paid and also about women's domestic slavery, namely the fact that women's work at home is not financially rewarded.⁷ Subsequently, the motif of women doing unpaid work at home was picked up by feminist writers, both liberal and those aligned to Marxism. Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* came to conclusion that women who do not earn their living won't ever reach the same status as men. She also criticised politicians and the media for preparing women for the role of a perfect housewife. The author of *The Feminine Mystique* did not deny that such role was important, but objected to its being the only role women should play in society, writing: 'The needs of sex and love are undeniably real in men and women, boys and girls, but why at this time [after the Second World War] did they seem to so many the *only* needs?'⁸

State socialism promised liberating women from the clutches of both capitalism and patriarchy through unalienated work. This fact was underlined in the Polish constitution from 1952, modelled on the Soviet constitution from 1936. It stated that Poland is a republic of the working people, whom the state is meant to serve. In paragraph 66, women were guaranteed the same rights and privileges as men, including the right to education and paid employment, and in paragraph 67, it promised to care particularly for families while also guaranteeing the same rights to children born out of wedlock as those birthed by married women.⁹

In Poland, as well as in other socialist countries, such as the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, the encouragement of women to move into paid employment served two goals simultaneously: to promote gender equality and to fill the gaps in the labour market, caused by the ambitious plans to industrialise and urbanise the country, especially in the light of the shortages of male labour, following the war destruction.¹⁰ Cinema in Poland played its part in the task in increasing women's participation in the labour market, promoting the idea of a Superwoman.¹¹

Because women in Poland were guaranteed the same education and employment rights, their status improved and they became less dependent on men. This meant that women had disposable income that did not require their husbands' permission to spend. Women who had means to support themselves could also postpone their marriage or choose not to marry. As Małgorzata Fidelis observes, young working-class women living in industrial centres, such as Nowa Huta, often became promiscuous, rather than seeking long-term relationships. Similarly, women who had a stable income and suffered domestic abuse were in a better position to divorce their husbands.¹² However, there were also disadvantages to pushing women into the workforce. They resulted from the fact that such employment was often unsuitable to them, such as in heavy industry, leading to exhaustion and accidents, even though traditionally male jobs were better paid. Moreover, allowing women to earn their living did not free them from patriarchal arrangements either at work or at home. At work, women fulfilled subservient positions; in factories, they were typically shop floor workers, while men filled positions of foremen. At home, women took on most of the responsibility for homework and raising children. The bulk of Polish men helped little at home, while expecting to be served by their spouses.¹³ Middle-class women were in a better position than their working-class counterparts, because they performed less exhausting labour and they were better paid, although this depended on their work.

The situation of Polish women changed after the end of Stalinism in the mid-1950s, when the push for them to work outside the home eased and there was a recognition that life is not only about work but also about consumption and pleasure. This was especially the case in the years 1957–58, when Polish women faced a high level of unemployment due to many female clerks being laid off, who were originally promoted to this role during Bierut's rule despite their lack of qualifications. The change resulted in the popular press promoting a different model of femininity – that of wife and mother.¹⁴ The 1960s brought further liberalisation regarding sexual behaviour and working-class women being supplanted by middle-class educated women in official discourses.¹⁵

Before I look at these changes in detail, it is worth mentioning that a similar shift in values happened in the West, as reflected in a collection of essays by Edgar Morin, the French philosopher and sociologist of the media, published in Polish in 1965 under the title *Duch czasu (Zeitgeist)*.¹⁶ Morin's essays cover the period after the mid-1950s and especially the 1960s, which also coincides with the end of Stalinism in Poland and the country becoming more socially liberal. One of the essays included in this book is titled 'The promotion of feminine values' with a focus on the media. Morin's main point is that masculine values, such as aggressiveness and affinity for adventure, are objects of projection. This means that ordinary men do not try to realise them in their lives but just project them on famous men they know from the media, such as sportsmen and actors. By contrast, feminine values, such as love and comfort of the family home, are not projected, but actualised in everyday life. Not only women but also many men identify with them and live according to them. Morin observes that because of the shift to feminine values a contemporary man becomes more feminine: he is weaker, more affectionate and tender.¹⁷ Although Morin acknowledges that women promoted in the media have more economic and sexual freedom, the gender roles assigned to them by society remain the same: that of a seductress and a housewife. If anything, these gender roles are even strengthened by the promotion of feminine values. Thus, paradoxically, emancipation of women in personal life serves patriarchy. The new emancipated

woman also overcame the contradictions of womanhood, pertaining to Christianity, in which there was a gulf between motherhood and fulfilling sexual needs, with mother being devoid of sexuality and sexuality being encapsulated by a figure of a prostitute. In addition, Morin observes that together with the promotion of feminine values one could observe advancement of the mythology of free time, holiday and travelling, as well as increased individualism.¹⁸ Similar observations were made by other authors, writing about the 1960s.¹⁹ Although Morin talks about women' liberation in the western world, his observations could be applied to socialist countries, such as Poland, following the death of Stalin and de-stalinisation after 1956. As Fidelis notes,

Reforms of the Stalinist system resulted in contradictory achievements for women. On the one hand, coercion in the workplace decreased. Women could voice their views more freely, including those on persistent discrimination in the workplace and at home. Some were able to leave full-time employment, often in horrid conditions, and devote themselves to full-time homemaking, if they so wished. The state liberalized its anti-abortion law, making the procedure more readily available.²⁰

The liberalisation of abortion law took place in 1957, partly for economic reasons, as fewer children meant reduced pressure on housing, which was one of the main problems in state socialist Poland throughout its entire existence. The new abortion act resulted in an increased rate of abortions, before it stabilised. In the first year following the act, there were 1.7 abortions for 100 women; in 1963–3.8, and in 1966 this number went down to 2.9.²¹ There were also more pregnancies out of wedlock, which did not lead to abortions. By the beginning of the new decade, as noted by Błażej Brzostek, one quarter of brides living in the cities were pregnant.²²

Dismantling the Stalinist system resulted in the raising of such intimate issues as sexuality and reproduction in public debates, topics that thus far had been suppressed by the Stalinist regime as part of the attempt to deny the existence of individual self-interest and to subjugate private life to the totalizing power of the state. The dominant models of femininity also changed. On the covers of popular magazines, modest women posing in working clothes were replaced by seductive women posing in swimming costumes, known as pussycats (*kociaki*).²³

The shift from the focus on women's work to that of pleasure (both of a woman and a man), free time and sexuality can be detected in Polish cinema. In the 1960s, we find many films that focus on such topics, featuring women who adopt a position of a seductress rather than a worker or mother. Often, we do not even know whether these women work or not. An example is Krystyna in Roman Polanski's *Nóż w wodzie* (*Knife in the Water*, 1962): a trophy wife of an affluent sports journalist, who during a yacht trip with a young student enjoys her superiority over the two men, and manages to seduce the young intruder (Kita 2022).²⁴ In some of these films from the 1960s, we could also see Kalina Jędrusik, most importantly *Lekarstwo na miłość* (*Medicine for Love*, 1965) by Jan Batory, who in this decade, as I argue in due course, epitomised the emancipated woman, enjoying pleasures of eroticism and free time. Of course, being a 'lady of leisure' was only possible for affluent women, as they did not engage in manual work, not least because such work spoiled their appearance.

The Art of Loving and Autumn Girl as 'Women's Cinema'

Apart from being considered biographical films, *The Art of Loving* and *Autumn Girl* can be regarded as examples of women's cinema, understood as cinema practice responding to a

desire of women to tell their own stories.²⁵ Although the stories presented in these two films are not exactly the stories of Sadowska and Klimkiewicz, their directors emphasised their personal involvement in the project. For example, Klimkiewicz said that 'When making this film, I wanted to learn about her [Kalina Jędrusik], understand her, and look at the world from her perspective'.²⁶ *Autumn Girl*, especially, involves a large proportion of women in its cast and crew. This film was not only directed by a woman but also scripted by women (Klimkiewicz and Patrycja Mnich); its cinematographer was likewise a woman (Weronika Bilka), as well as all senior roles in its production (Sylvia Rajdaszka, Ewa Jastrzębska, Renata Czarnkowska-Listoś, and Maria Gołoś). Of course, the main role is also played by a woman: Maria Dębska.

Such large involvement of female personnel in film production points to a conscious desire of Polish female directors to be perceived as 'women filmmakers', as opposed to just 'good filmmakers', which was the case for the leading female directors who made their debuts under the communist regime, who showed little allegiance to the concept of 'women's cinema' as a distinct phenomenon.²⁷ They pride themselves on having a pro-women agenda and being part of a broader historic tradition. The fact that they look back at a history of women who distinguished themselves as nonconformist adds to the sense that they regard their position as distinct from that of male directors. Additionally, Sadowska and Klimkiewicz's decision to make films about Wisłocka and Jędrusik can be seen as paying tribute to women who paved the way for the improvements all contemporary Polish women, including filmmakers, enjoy. At the same time, Wisłocka and Jędrusik are not ordinary or simple 'feminist icons' (if any simple feminist icons exist), but complex characters who largely defined themselves by their relations to men.

The Art of Loving: Personal and Political

The Art of Loving presents the life of Michalina Wisłocka (1921–2005), Polish gynaecologist, sexologist, author of the bestselling book *Sztuka kochania* (*The Art of Loving*), published in 1978, as well as media personality, whose life, as some authors claim, is like a 'ready-made script'.²⁸ Marysia Sadowska (b. 1976), who directed the film, previously showed a penchant for telling stories about women, as testified by her film *Dzień kobiet* (*Women's Day*, 2012), about labour and sexual exploitation of a woman who works in a supermarket. Since *The Art of Loving*, she directed several women-centred films, including *Dziewczyny z Dubaju* (*Girls from Dubai*, 2021), about prostitutes. In *The Art of Loving*, the main character was played by one of the most popular Polish actresses of those who made their debut after 2000: Magdalena Boczarska. Boczarska was widely praised for her role.²⁹

Given Sadowska's age, her foray into the biography of Wisłocka was a journey not into her own past, but that of her parents and grandparents. This might explain the fact that, unlike the directors of the older generation, such as Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Zanussi or Krzysztof Kieślowski, for whom the conflict between the communist authorities and the rest of the population was of the greatest importance, Sadowska is more interested in micro-politics, especially gender dynamics within the family and workplace.

The film presents most of Wisłocka's adult life, from the beginning of the Second World War till the publishing of her book and beyond, with special focus on the 1970s. This is when the story is set; with earlier periods being presented through flashbacks. The film

begins in 1939, when she meets her future husband, Stanisław Wiślocki, a budding biologist, with whom she falls in love at first sight, when seeing him bathing in a lake. Given their shared interest in science (his in biology, her in human anatomy), the future Mrs imagines them as the new version of Pierre and Marie Curie. However, during the war the Wiślockis' careers are halted. They work in the German institute developing a vaccine against typhus, feeding lice in a hot room, among many fellow lice feeders. Many Polish members of the intelligentsia were engaged in this type of work. It was attractive due to the large food rations and lack of physical labour. It can also be regarded as symbolic for Wiślocka's future situation, in which body and work are intimately related.

Although Wiślocka, as portrayed in the film, genuinely loves her husband, having sex with him causes her pain, which might be one reason that she chooses gynaecology as her specialism. He, on his part, does not feel responsible for his wife's sexual problems and not only refuses to tackle them by becoming a more considerate and patient lover, but also accuses her of not loving him enough. He demands that Michalina fake pleasure, so that her negative experience does not undermine his faith in his own virility. The lack of sexual compatibility, as Błażej Brzostek argues, was a common problem for Polish couples after the Second World War.³⁰

To tackle the problem, Wiślocka invites her friend Wanda to live with the couple and become Stanisław's lover. One wonders why in these circumstances she did not decide to live on her own. This can be explained by her love and emotional dependence on her husband, as well as postwar economic hardship, especially in relation to housing. Many couples often did not divorce because they were trapped in the same cramped house or apartment and had nowhere to move. This explanation is plausible in the light of memories of Wiślocka's daughter, who remembers their difficult housing conditions.³¹ However, the question of why Wiślocka endures her husband's indifference and emotional cruelty is never broached in the film, either directly, as nobody in the film talks about it, or indirectly, by showing Wiślocka considering leaving her husband. Rather, the female doctor puts her love over her dignity and normalises this decision. It is only when Wiślocka discovers that her husband sleeps with many women and photographs them in compromising poses that she demands that he leaves. By this stage, both Wanda and Michalina gave birth to children fathered by Wiślocki in roughly the same time: Wanda to a boy, Michalina to a girl. In fact, Wiślocka became pregnant to hide the fact that Wanda was going to have a child out of wedlock. In this way, all the people involved could pretend that Stanisław and Michalina were parents of twins. For many years, this fact was not revealed even to the children of Michalina and Wanda. They only learnt when Wanda decided to leave, taking her son with her. Accepting such a bizarre arrangement to keep her man was not common, even in the patriarchal Poland of state socialism. In this respect, Wiślocka endured more than an average mistreated wife, and one wonders whether this was because of her immense love for her husband or because of her social conformism, which led to her decision to keep up appearances at all costs. Whatever the answer, this situation suggests that Wiślocka was less liberated from patriarchy than her public image suggests. The fact that Sadowska's film does not probe the question of Wiślocka's entanglement in the patriarchal structures might suggest her unwillingness to tarnish her image as a 'saviour' of Polish women.

When the flashbacks take us to the 1950s, we accompany Wiślocka 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 with a research facility, where she works on women's sexual health. Her work on contraceptives is dismissed by her older male boss who claims that women's health is not a priority for the state. He explains that if she tried to solve heart problems, which are more common among men, it would be different. She is also undermined on the grounds that as somebody who had to commute from Warsaw and juggle academic pursuits while bringing up two children, she would not be able to work to the required standard. At some point, the boss also suggests that she should collaborate with a male colleague, to raise the profile of her research. This can be seen as a sign that after the end of Stalinism, there was a shift towards patriarchy, through encouraging women to embrace their role as mothers and wives, at the expense of being workers, as claimed by Fidelis and other scholars. Wisłocka rejects the offer of her boss, worried that her inventions would be stolen and does not give into her boss' approach, insisting that women's health and pleasure, including sexual pleasure, are as important as those of men. On many occasions in the film she also points out that these pleasures are connected: a woman who cannot achieve orgasm would leave her husband frustrated (as was her case). This emphasis can be regarded as another sign of Wisłocka's pragmatism – to have men on her side in her fight for safe and pleasurable sex, which also includes the right to abortion, she has to appeal to their self-interest. It can also be regarded as a sign of her genuine belief that happiness can be achieved only through (heterosexual) love. This is conveyed in an early episode of the film when we see her writing on her typewriter about how everybody wants to play a great role in one's life and the best role is that which can be admired by somebody who loves us. Some reviewers noted that this was a testimony to Wisłocka's traditional views on love and marriage.³²

When Wisłocka is effectively dismissed from her post at the Białystok University, she loses interest in advancing her research and being half of the new Maria Skłodowska-Pierre Curie couple. Her priority becomes helping her patients 'on the ground', advising them on the best way to achieve orgasm. The zeal in which she tries to help women shows something of a 'socialist fighter' about her, as represented in cinema and literature. Wisłocka's patients show her gratitude, wherever she appears, which strengthens her conviction that she should devote her time to helping them. Wisłocka's effort to raise the profile of women's health, as well as their right to abortion and standing up to domestic abuse, coincides with the demise of Stalinism, and the rise of women's issues in Poland, as previously mentioned. However, her journey, as presented by Sadowska, is from fighting for the 'basics', such as safe sex and safety in marriage, to a loftier goal, namely finding pleasure in erotic life (although chiefly marital life), as opposed to having sex solely for procreation, in line with rising 'female values', as mentioned by Morin. Elżbieta Durys argues that this links Wisłocka's project with the western counter-culture of the 1960s, which was also largely about promoting female values.³³ Wisłocka was even ahead of her time in this respect, as she started to engage in free sex already in the 1940s, although for reasons which, as I indicated, ultimately served the patriarchal character of her family, rather than her pleasure. She is aware of her avant-garde position, saying at some stage that 'I'm not in favour of the sexual revolution – I am the sexual revolution'.

Wisłocka's progress, as depicted in the film, is marked by moving from advising women in her surgery to writing a book that can reach a much larger audience. Men whom Wisłocka encounters are initially hostile to or dismissive of her writing on such a sensitive

topic, arguing that either there is no need to do it because everybody knows enough about sex or that reading such a book would corrupt readers. However, they are themselves its avid consumers, testifying to the hypocrisy of Polish society under state socialism. Wiśłocka accepts a degree of hypocrisy as a price worth paying for functioning in a society whose rules are shaped by the 'unholy alliance' of the socialist state and the church, as proven by her getting pregnant to cover her unusual sleeping arrangement with her husband.

In the film, as in reality, Wiśłocka is not a political dissident. She tries to work with the state socialist system and improve it, so it better serves ordinary people and herself. This is conveyed in episodes showing her attempts to have her book published. Although her argument about the need for Poles to read this book is dismissed by apparatchiks, she keeps returning to them, like a stalker. We see her entering the backroom, where one such apparatchik engages in extramarital sex. She attempts to blackmail him, saying that she won't betray his secret if he won't obstruct publication of her book, but he challenges her by questioning her knowledge about the 'art of loving', given that she lived in a love triangle. There is an irony in such a statement, given that the man is himself involved in a clandestine affair, but this irony is lost on him, no doubt because he is blinded by the male sense of entitlement.

Wiśłocka also relies on the typical socialist way of arranging things through personal connections (*znajomości*). This is revealed in an episode where she is advised by another apparatchik to approach the Church hierarchy and the high-ranking priest tells her to go to the third pillar of political power – the media. She follows his advice and it works – she publishes her book in instalments in a women's magazine, despite not having the 'Party blessing' at this point. This also confirms the observation, made by Morin, about the importance of the media and especially women's magazines in shaping people's values and everyday behaviour. Efforts to publish her book allow Wiśłocka to extend her circle of friends who have the right connections, mostly wives of the Party dignitaries, army officers, the secret service and the civil service. It is thanks to their joint effort that *The Art of Loving* is eventually published as a book 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.

Wiśłocka's sense of being the embodiment of the sexual revolution, as well as her attachment to feminine values, is expressed through her clothes. Whilst at the beginning of the story she dresses in a conventional way, sporting white shirts and pencil skirts, subsequently she changes her attire into bright patterned dresses. On one occasion, when she visits an editorial office, we see her 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 'garment'. Her penchant for colourful clothes made from curtains and tablecloths renders her a transitional figure between postwar austerity, when women's magazines advised women how to make clothes from some leftovers or material used for other purposes, and a later postsocialist period, when such extreme shortages were overcome and Polish women were allowed, even encouraged to look after their appearance.³⁴ It is not only Wiśłocka who has an individualistic 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. Similarly, Wanda is presented as an elegant woman, even at times of hardship, during the Second World War.

A large part of the film is devoted to exploring how pregnancy affects women's lives. On one hand, we see Wanda getting pregnant and insisting that she bears a child, which forces Michalina, who does not want to have children, into getting pregnant as well, to cover the 'mistake' of her friend. On the other hand, Wisłocka, being a gynaecologist, tries to help some women become pregnant and others to avoid pregnancy, as well as dealing with the consequences of unplanned pregnancies. However, her main work, as presented in the film, is in contraception and abortion, no doubt reflecting the times in which the film was made, when the restrictive abortion law in Poland led to polarising discussions about women's reproductive rights.³⁵

During the time when Wisłocka worked in a lab, she challenged the professor, giving a lecture on this topic, by telling him that the new contraceptive produced in the form of powder is useless. When she worked in a hospital, she helped victims of botched abortions, preventing them from dying. According to her daughter, Wisłocka tried different forms of contraceptives on herself and discovered that some did not work. Consequently, she had three abortions. This extra-cinematic knowledge points to the fact that the authors of the film position themselves in favour of a liberal abortion law and certainly more liberal than the current one: the fact noted by reviewers, claiming that the film is a distinct political statement.³⁶ However, the fact that the film makes no reference to Wisłocka's abortions might be seen as testifying to their unwillingness to undermine her status as an educator and expert, positioned above the ordinary victims of unplanned pregnancies. Another explanation is their concern that including it might put off more conservative viewers, unwilling to accept the film protagonist having an abortion as a means of conducting experiments on the safety of contraceptives. By and large, the film is a careful balancing act between presenting Wisłocka as an 'ordinary' woman, yearning for love and a champion of women's rights for safe sex and abortion, and as a victim of patriarchy and her own political and social conformism.

Stylistically, *The Art of Loving*, like Sadowska's previous work, *Women's Day*, comes across as a realistic film in the convention of melodrama, with stars in the main parts. Apart from Boczarska, we also see popular male actor Piotr Adamczyk in the role of her husband. It attempts to provide the viewer with visual pleasure, although sex scenes are usually shot in a way that avoids objectifying the main character: from a distance, without focusing on female body parts. Nevertheless, its classical narrative and style are at odds with the principle of feminist cinema, consisting of 'destroying pleasure', as advocated in the seminal essay by Laura Mulvey.³⁷ The classical style, in my view, testifies to the desire to make a film with a popular appeal.

The Overflowing Sex of Kalina Jędrusik in *Autumn Girl*

Kalina Jędrusik (1930–1991), the leading character of *Bo we mnie jest seks* (*Autumn Girl*), was in the 1960s a famous actress, singer and – what we can describe today – a celebrity. She graduated from the State Theatre School in Kraków in 1953 and then left for Gdańsk where she got a contract at the Teatr Wybrzeże. In Gdańsk, she met Stanisław Dygat, her future husband, already a recognised writer, 16 years older than her and at the time married. They moved to Warsaw in 1955. There Jędrusik started playing in films, but

she gained most fame thanks to a television programme, *Kabaret Starszych Panów* (*Elderly Gentlemen's Cabaret*), aired weekly, where she made her debut in 1960. She was also known for keeping an 'open house' or a literary salon with Dygat, where she organised house parties. As one writer mentions in a documentary devoted to her, everybody who mattered in Warsaw wanted to attend these parties; not being invited equalled social suicide.

Thanks to her behaviour in her professional and private life, Jędrusik became a sex symbol in Poland of the 1960s, or even the ultimate Polish sex symbol.³⁸ Many compared the marriage of Jędrusik and Dygat to that between Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller,³⁹ a comparison which Dygat, enchanted by American culture, accepted and even encouraged. There were other obvious similarities between Jędrusik and Monroe. For example, both were not only actresses, but also singers whose singing was very sensual, with Jędrusik's voice being close to a whisper. Both marriages of these actresses and writers were also childless. Furthermore, both actresses exuded a mixture of innocence and depravity, which Morin regarded as pertaining to new times, in which feminine values prevailed. Jędrusik was also compared to Brigitte Bardot, the European equivalent of Monroe and, again, the Polish star encouraged this comparison.⁴⁰ However, although Monroe and Bardot pushed the boundary of what was acceptable in American and French cinema and culture, they also drew on the earlier sex-bombs, like Jean Harlow, in the case of Monroe. Jędrusik, on the other hand, operated largely in a cultural and cinematic void. This was partly due to the medium with which she was identified, namely television, being still new in Poland when she made her debut. This left people working in it with much freedom to shape it. The two men behind *Elderly Gentlemen's Cabaret*, Jerzy Wasowski and Jeremi Przybora, used television to invent a new type of entertainment, with new characters and stories. When doing so, they created a self-contained universe different from the socialist realist world of factories, production plans and shock workers, which dominated in the Polish media of the 1950s. Their protagonists did not work (or their employment was not revealed in the programmes and was not relevant to the stories they told) and devoted their time to private pursuits, mostly ephemeral encounters, semi-philosophical talks and the search for love. Wasowski and Przybora themselves played in these productions, creating distinctly upper-class and old-fashioned personas of elderly gentlemen.

Early in their programmes, Przybora and Wasowski created the character 'Kalina', who, as its very name suggests, largely drew on the personality of an actress, exaggerating her qualities and – possibly – affecting the real Jędrusik, who tried to live up to her image in the *Cabaret*. This image was based on two main traits. One was whimsicality and the other was otherworldliness. Jędrusik came to *Cabaret* as if from nowhere, created from a 'spare radiator rib',⁴¹ not unlike Eve being created from Adam's rib, given that in Polish 'rib' (*żeberko*) means both a part of human anatomy and a part of a radiator. Kalina in the *Cabaret* comes across as detached, even from other performers, who already were presented as living in the microcosm, away from the everyday life of state socialism. She thus behaved as if following her rules, which even Wasowski and Przybora had to follow. This was reflected, for example, in her singing a song 'Nie budźcie mnie' (Don't Wake Me Up), in which she asks to be allowed to sleep because her nocturnal reality is happier than the one in which the people whom she addresses, live. The second feature of her persona was her sexiness and her exclusive interest in love, as conveyed

by such songs as 'Do ciebie szłam' (I Went to You) and 'S.O.S', in which she sends this signal to rescue a dying love.

There was a certain incongruity in Jędrusik's image in the *Cabaret*, as well as in some of her theatre and film performances, most importantly in *Lekarstwo na miłość* (*Medicine for Love*, 1965), directed by Jan Batory, the film with which she is most strongly associated. On one hand, she connoted sexuality, even shamelessness, as conveyed in her wearing deep cleavage and tight dresses, revealing her curvaceous figure. On the other hand, she behaved as if she saw nothing provocative in her appearance or behaviour. This brings to mind the idea, proposed by Morin, that the emancipated woman of the 1960s combines the character of a whore and a virgin.⁴² The impression of her combining innocence and immortality was exacerbated by her wearing the most conspicuous sign of innocence and resistance to the communist ideology: a golden cross, when wearing low-cut dresses, revealing her full breasts. Most importantly, Jędrusik performed, dressed this way, during the concert celebrating the work of Polish coalminers, so-called Barbórka, in December 1962. Her appearance outraged political authorities, including the chairman of the Polish United Workers' Party, Władysław Gomułka, which resulted in temporarily banning her from performing on television. This episode in Jędrusik's life is at the centre of Klimkiewicz's biopic.

By choosing as its setting the years 1962–63, the film shows Jędrusik when she was simultaneously at her most attractive and most controversial.⁴³ At this time, as we are to believe, the actress waged a war against the socialist state, which tried to root out Catholic religion and against bigots, offended by her sexual freedom. Klimkiewicz goes along this tradition of representing Jędrusik. This is signalled by the very title of the film. She also emphasises other feminine qualities of the actress, such as her care of appearance. We gather it from the initial titles of the film, which draw on the tradition of pop art and focus on Jędrusik as a fashion icon – presenting her in many different outfits. Their montage suggests that they are not just items of clothing, but are at the centre of Jędrusik's identity. Without them, she would be reduced to a head without a torso.

The proper film starts with some mannequins in the shop display window, talking to each other. The episode signals that the film would not be entirely realistic, a point I will return to in due course. Soon Jędrusik and her husband, Stanisław Dygat, pass the window display. They walk at night, which renders them nocturnal creatures – unlike the bulk of the working class, who sleep at night, to be ready for work at 6 or 7 am. In this first night-time episode, we also see a female cleaner, sweeping the street. There is a poignant contrast between the elegant couple and the working-class woman, whose presence they fail to acknowledge, suggesting that they live in their universe. The contrast continues in the next episode, when Jędrusik realises that she lost the key to the entrance to their bloc of flats. She is waking up neighbours, asking them to throw her the key. One of them, an ordinary-looking woman, stands on the balcony, criticising Jędrusik for being disruptive. The actress talks back, rather than apologising for the disruption. She also chastises her husband for not engaging in the quarrel, to which he replies that he 'does not discuss with female street vendors (*przekupki*)'. Such claims reflect on Dygat's class prejudice and misogyny, which would be revealed on other occasions in the film, but not challenged, either by Jędrusik or by the filmmakers, suggesting that they also take a pro-elite stance.

The Dygats' apartment is a semi-private place, because it is always visited by somebody, either their friends or children of their neighbours, who come and go as they wish. It is also shared with Jędrusik's young lover Lucek, who is a pop star, played by the real rock star, Krzysztof Zalewski. Dygat not only tolerates this arrangement, but is on good terms with the younger man, perhaps because the pop star earns more than Kalina and Stanisław, helping them to fill the gaps in their budget. The only source of a (mild) disagreement between the members of the household concerns their popularity: each of the three people craves it. The lack of conflict might be attributed to the fact that these two men play different roles in Jędrusik's life: Dygat is for more intellectual conversations; Lucek is for sex, as we never see Kalina having sex with her husband or talking much to Lucek.

While the private space is an extension of the public life of the Dygats, the public space is domesticated by them. It seems like wherever they go, especially Jędrusik, they are surrounded by friends and being on friendly terms with somebody is the way to do business in the PRL. These public spaces include shops, cafés, artists' clubs and the television studio. First, we see Jędrusik in a department store. She goes there with her female friend, who makes costumes for her, a character in part based on a famous television set and costume designer, Xymena Zaniewska.

They watch bales of cloth, and Zaniewska suggests buying some for Jędrusik's new dress, despite its high price, emphasising the significance of fashion for the actress. The importance of being dressed well is evoked in more episodes in the film, for example when Jędrusik sees a woman entering a restaurant/club in a fox fur coat and proclaims: 'I have to have this fur coat', leading to a series of events that finish with her losing the job in television. Jędrusik further acknowledges the importance of clothes for her appearance, saying 'I have to show my décolletage, because my neck is short, like a champagne's neck'. When Xymena asks her how she manages to remain so slim when she eats so much, she replies: 'I'm not slim, I'm only tightened in the waist'. This exchange, which takes place in a café, where Jędrusik eats both her cream cake and that of her more weight-conscious friend, shows the actress trying to reconcile her hedonism with a desire to please a 'male eye' by appearing slim. We also see her trying to do it by wearing high heels and strong make-up. Having make-up is so important for her that she puts it on in a car when waiting at the traffic lights, causing the other cars to miss the green light and making the driver behind her shout at her with anger.

Jędrusik is also late for rehearsals in television. This can be regarded as a testimony to her adopting a posture of a diva,⁴⁴ as well as her rejection of the socialist ethos with its emphasis on responsibility and privileging the welfare of the collective over the individual. Jędrusik does not care about irritating other people by her selfish or erratic behaviour. We even gather that her frustration gives her a sense of power and adds to her self-image as a nonconformist. It can also be read as playing up her class – which is the more important, as other markers of belonging to the elite, such as being rich, were not possible in the PRL, where the difference in earnings between different sections of society was modest.

The main conflict in the film is triggered by Jędrusik's performance during the miners' holiday of Barbórka in December 1962, which unsettled Władysław Gomułka, as I already mentioned. Gomułka, however, as all high-ranking political figures, is absent from Klimkiewicz's narrative, except as an image on a poster. Instead, during this event we see for the

first time Ryszard (Rysiek) Molski, a new head of entertainment on Polish television and Jędrusik's old colleague from the Wybrzeże theatre in Gdansk. Ryszard is a fictitious figure, although based on the stereotype of the people in positions of power in the PRL, who achieved their elevated status not due to their talent, but because of their loyalty to the Party.

Rysiek is enchanted by the actress, and after the spectacle, invites her for supper, but the star snubs him, saying that she has already made plans to return to Warsaw. Her rejection of her boss' advances has a class inflection. Rysiek comes across as socially awkward; he is not 'in the know' when dealing with cultural elites. We can conjecture that he comes from the province and probably climbed the social ladder thanks to joining the political establishment. The Dygats and their circle of friends, by contrast, play up their insider knowledge of cultural codes and are openly anti-establishment.

Even though nobody in Jędrusik's circle likes Rysiek, the actress is advised by her friend to make amends with him and invite him to the SPATIF, the actors' club, where his anger can be diffused. During this outing, Kalina and Rysiek go to the cloakroom with the intention of the actress trying out the fur coat. Whilst there, Rysiek unsuccessfully tries to seduce Jędrusik. Jędrusik's rejection of his advances leads to his angry outburst, exacerbated by his knowledge about her promiscuity. In due course, he tries to ban her from television. This decision illustrates the fact that under state socialism personal politics mattered as much, if not more, than Party politics. It also points to the fact that in the PRL men occupied positions of power, while women remained in subordinate positions. This meant that either women accepted their subservience, which also meant putting up with sexual harassment or risked being unemployed. Jędrusik was privileged in this respect, as she had several streams of income, playing not only in television but also in theatre and cinema (although Klimkiewicz does not refer to this fact, most likely to amplify Kalina's anguish), as well as her husband (although he has no money to share when she owes it to her cleaner) and a well-off lover. By contrast, many working-class women did not have the luxury to walk off from the abuse. In the end, Jędrusik is reinstated in the *Cabaret*. This happens thanks to her winning a poll for the best actress, published by one of the most popular Polish dailies.

Jędrusik was childless due to miscarriage or, as some authors allege, a botched abortion.⁴⁵ However, she was known for compensating for this loss with her love of animals. The film alludes to it, showing the Dygats living with a dog, on which the actress dotes. We also see her with the children of her friendly neighbour, who adore her. They visit her in her apartment, and she takes one of the kids to the cinema. She also defends one of her young friends at the playground, when he is shouted at by a mother of another boy. This proves her femininity without adhering to the traditional model of a wife and mother. By the same token, the film subtly denounces the politics of the Law and Justice party, which ruled at the time, whose programme and specific political decisions privileged traditional families.

Morin mentions that in the 1960s feminine values were adopted not only by women, but also by men. This idea is conveyed by Jędrusik's partners, especially Dygat, being presented as a houseman, happy to spend his days in the sitting room. The fact that he tolerates his wife's lover also points to him shunning the masculine value of chivalry, according to which a man must fight for his woman and being cuckolded brings shame on a man. By contrast, Dygat feels no such shame. On one occasion, it feels as if

his tolerance of his wife's promiscuity is going too far. It happens when Jędrusik loses her job and Dygat plays down her problems and even suggests that it was her fault that she found herself in such an unfortunate situation by rejecting the advances of her boss. Significantly, in this moment of crisis, it is her lover rather than her husband who offers her moral and financial support. On another occasion, however, Dygat beats up a man who insults his wife. This, however, does not impress Jędrusik. On the contrary, it makes her angry, as she claims that she would rather defend herself. Masculine values often come across as projections or even something put in quotation marks, as in an episode of the meeting between Dygat and readers in a literary club. He goes there with his friend, subsequently a well-known film director, Kazimierz Kutz, who plays a role there as his boxing trainer. It is obvious for the audience (both in the film diegesis and those watching the film) that these men are putting on a show, rather than revealing their true identities. Although men in Klimkiewicz's film enjoy domesticity, it is still the task of women, specifically Jędrusik in this case, to ensure that the home works properly. She is the one who buys the coveted meat, which was a scarce good in the PRL on the black market, cooks and serves food. That said, cleaning is done by a woman specially hired for this task.

While Morin does not link female values with class, in Klimkiewicz's film this connection is played up. Attractive women in the film all belong to the artistic bohemia. By contrast, working-class women come across as unattractive and backward. They don't care about their femininity, hence don't look at Jędrusik as a role model. On the contrary, her attractiveness lays bare the shortcomings in their appearance, which explains the alleged hostility to the actress, shown at the Barbórka celebrations, when wives of miners get frustrated by their husbands' enchantment by Jędrusik's beauty and boldness.

While Sadowska in her film uses the conventions of melodrama, Klimkiewicz opts for a musical comedy. This led one reviewer to regard *Autumn Girl* as a parallel to *Medicine for Love*.⁴⁶ The use of such a form, associated with hedonism and light-heartedness, combined with a happy ending, adds to the sense that the film, despite its dark moments, is optimistic. It does not question the possibility of being an emancipated woman in the PRL, but affirms it, showing Jędrusik who achieved this goal. For some critics, this lightness is a weakness of *Autumn Girl*, as in this way it trivialises the life of Jędrusik, reducing it to a 'pop-art postcard'.⁴⁷ This difference can be attributed to the different interests and sensitivities of the directors, with Sadowska championing the cause of working-class women in *Women's Day*, and Klimkiewicz directing mostly television series without any distinct political agenda. It can also be linked to different occupations of the films' protagonists, with musical being more fitting to present the life of a singing actress than that of a sexologist.

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed the representation of two prominent Polish women, Michalina Wisłocka and Kalina Jędrusik, in biographical films, devoted to them. I pointed to the complexity of their situation. In some ways, they came across as liberated, rejecting the ideas of how women should live their lives, dominating in the Polish culture of the time, entering non-standard erotic and domestic arrangements. In reality, however, they were not entirely liberated from men and patriarchy. In the case of Wisłocka, her untypical

marital arrangement was a consequence of her unwillingness to reject patriarchal rules. The fact that the films focus on successful battles with the structures of power that Wiśłocka and Jędrusik fought suggests, however, that rather than examining the complexity of their mindset, the filmmakers want to highlight their pioneering role as champions of women and feminine values in the PRL. Ultimately, they show that, as Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight observe, 'like ourselves, the women we research are formed by their times – while they may push against the grain, they are nevertheless caught within what their times allow to their imaginations and roles'.⁴⁸

The interest in the lives of these women, both of whom likely had abortions and were either childless (in the case of Jędrusik) or deviated from the traditional ideal of motherhood (in the case of Wiśłocka), can also be interpreted as voicing an opposition against the political climate in Poland of the 2010s, marked by restrictive abortion laws and a focus on traditional feminine roles of wife and mother.

Both films also draw attention to the relation of class and material status on one hand and women's liberation on the other. *The Art of Loving* does so by emphasising that Wiśłocka was constrained in her career by housing problems, as well as showing working-class women to be the main victims of the restrictive abortion law and their own ignorance about sex. Klimkiewicz points to the link between liberation and sex by suggesting that Jędrusik was emancipated in part because she rejected the lifestyle of ordinary people, whom she perceived as small-minded.

Notes

1. Staszczyszyn, "A Lust for Life: Making Sense of Biopic Cinema in Poland".
2. Mrozek, "Film pamięci narodowej: Najnowsze kino polskie w dyskursie polityki historycznej", 295–320.
3. See Durys, "Film and Values: Polish Cinema of National Remembrance" and "W nurcie polskiego kina kobiet: *Sztuka kochania* Marii Sadowskiej".
4. I'm leaving out Osiecka, whose biopic, being a television series, requires a separate study.
5. Morin, *Duch czasu*.
6. Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 134.
7. Chattopadhyay, "Marx on Women's Question".
8. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 160.
9. Konstytucja Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej Uchwalona przez Sejm Ustawodawczy w dniu 22 lipca 1952 roku.
10. Mrozek, "Przemiany pozycji kobiet w PRL-u: wybrane konteksty"; Fidelis, "Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland", 103–64; Wieruszewski, "Równość kobiet i mężczyzn w Polsce Ludowej", 1975.
11. Ostrowska, "Polish 'Superwoman': a Liberation or Victimisation", 55–74.
12. Fidelis, 179–82.
13. Fidelis, 170–85; Mrozek, 272–74.
14. Zofia Sokół. "Wzór osobowy kobiety i model rodziny na łamach prasy kobiecej (1945–1990)", In *Polskie oblicza feminizmu*, 66. Edited by Weronika Chańska and Danuta Ulicka. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo, 2000).
15. Sokół, 76; Błażej Brzostek, *Życie codzienne kobiet w PRL*, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2025, 94–5.
16. Zofia Sokół pays attention to the fact that in the 1960s Western ideas, including feminism, started to enter Poland, thanks to repealing the Iron Curtain to some extent, as this translation suggests.
17. Morin, 139–44.

18. Morin, 143–44.
19. Diski, *The Sixties*, 49–67; Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958–c. 1974*.
20. Fidelis, 172.
21. Mrozek, 271.
22. Brzostek, 95.
23. Fidelis and Stańczak-Wiślicz, "Piękne i zaradne: Rytuały ciała, moda i uroda", 419–26.
24. Kita in her perceptive study also draws on Morin's observations of the rise of female values in culture. See Kita, "2 razy 3. O trójkątach w filmach *Nóż w wodzie* i *Kobieta jest kobietą*", 127–45.
25. Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", 31–40; De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*; Butler, *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen*; White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*.
26. Quoted in Hrapkowicz, "Bo we mnie jest seks".
27. Mazierska and Ostrowska, *Women in Polish Cinema*, 149–220.
28. Kowalska, "Wisłocka: jej życia nie trzeba ubarwiać, jest gotowym scenariuszem filmowym."
29. Tracewicz, "Bo we mnie jest seks" - recenzja filmu. Maria Dębska stała się Kaliną Jędrusik!"
30. Brzostek, 90–5.
31. Koszowska, "Krystyna Bielewicz o Michalinie Wisłockiej: była wolną kobietą, usunęła bez żalu".
32. Osmólska, "O tych rzeczach ..."
33. Durys, "W nurcie polskiego kina kobiet: *Sztuka kochania* Marii Sadowskiej."
34. Fidelis and Stańczak-Wiślicz, 417–42.
35. Hussein, Cottingham, Nowicka and Kismodi, "Abortion in Poland: politics, progression and regression".
36. Kyziół, "Seks i inne demony. Recenzja filmu: „Sztuka kochania. Historia Michaliny Wisłockiej”.
37. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 14–26.
38. This view is expressed by Agnieszka Osiecka in a documentary *Nie odchódź* (*Don't Go Away*, 1992), directed by Tadeusz Pawłowicz and tacitly conveyed by being the first postwar sex bomb covered in a book, *Seks bomby PRL-u* (*Sex Bombs of the PRL*). See Tomasić 2014.
39. Ibid., 16.
40. Kurz, *Twarze w tłumie: Wizerunki bohaterów wyobraźni zbiorowej w kulturze polskiej lat 1955–1969*, 155–8.
41. Ibid, 164.
42. This also connects likens Jędrusik to Brigitte Bardot.
43. Iwona Kurz, *Twarze w tłumie: Wizerunki bohaterów w wyobraźni zbiorowej w kulturze polskiej lat 1955–69*, Izabelin; Świat Literacki, 2005, p. 154.
44. Marilyn Monroe was also known for being late for film shootings.
45. Tomasić, op. cit., 24.
46. Tracewicz, op. cit.
47. Zacharczuk, op. cit.
48. Gledhill and Knight, 5.

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