

A Case of Mixed Identities

The Representation of Women in Post-Socialist Polish Films

by *Janina Falkowska*

Cet article explique que les changements politiques de la Pologne et la conversion à des modes de production capitalistes

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donnent lieu à une représentation plus misogyne des femmes dans les médias et dans les films du pays.

A big poster featuring the body of a woman in the form of a huge beer bottle welcomes me at every train station and central plaza in Poland. The slim beer bottle, which advertises a product of the Elblag Beer Company is firmly held by a strong, masculine hand.

This is 1994. A brief trip to Poland forces me to reassess the social and political changes that have taken place in this country since 1989 and to contemplate along with these changes, some disturbing transformations in the representation of women in Polish films and media. This surprising poster, a novelty in the democratic Poland, exemplifies these changes and also raises some questions. First, how is it possible that in the age of feminist awareness this poster was not banned by the city authorities for its blatant misogynist content? Second, how can this subordinate presentation of a woman be reconciled with the constitutional guarantee of equal rights among men and women introduced in Poland after 1945?

This article will attempt to answer these questions by examining the representation of women in contemporary films and situating it in the context of recent developments in Poland's political and social life. I would like to suggest that in Poland, as in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, a disturbing cultural shift backwards in the representation of women can be observed. The general impression is that the changing political situation and the switch to capitalistic modes of production has led to a more explicitly misogynist depiction of women in the country's films and media. Consequently, the image of the strong, independent woman, depicted in the films of the seventies and the eighties, has been replaced by blatantly sexist portrayals of women as objects in the nineties.

The portrayal of the woman in the beer ad is symptomatic of the discrepancy between the official stance of the government concerning the constitutionally sanctioned equality of women at work and in social life, and the recent representation of Polish women in the media, in film, in the arts and in advertising which completely undermine these noble postulates. Especially now, at a time of a newly enjoyed freedom of speech, bizarre sexist images finally make explicit what has been known to Polish women for years: deep down Polish society, which claims to be open-minded, unbiased, educated, and advanced in its thinking, is in fact firmly grounded in patriarchal ideology. By not officially condemning the poster, contemporary Polish society advocates its message and upholds the patriarchal premises which lie behind its creation.

The patriarchal ideology which for over fifty years of contemporary Polish history has been shrouded by a mist of illusory equitable working relations (everybody had a state job until the system collapsed) is now being brought to the surface by the introduction of an aggressive market economy and a new capitalist context of production. Job advertisements in the best known newspapers with wide circulation are full of requirements clearly revealing gender, age, and family discrimination. Sometimes these guidelines are veiled in unassuming words such as "a favourable family situation" (indicating that the employer prefers a single person); or "a dynamic, young person; available 24 hours a day" (for the most part excluding married women with children). In most cases, however, the gender and age bias is openly pronounced without any stylistic obfuscations. The employer wants a young man, healthy, and no older than 35.

The patriarchal ideology is consistently manifested in the persona of attractive tv presenters, in advertisements in which only young and beautiful women can display a company's products, and in films by younger film directors, like Wladyslaw Pasikowski or Jacek Skalski, who indulge in the portrayal of women as stereotypically young, sexy, and not very bright. In their flashy (and fleshy) remakes of American B movies these filmmakers of a new generation present blatantly misogynistic images of women in sexy clothes who sell their bodies and their souls in order to climb a social ladder. Wladyslaw Pasikowski's "Dogs 1" (1991) and "Dogs 2" (1992), both extremely popular with general audiences in Poland, promote the culture of violence and cruelty as well as the objectifying and demeaning treatment of women. Jacek Skalski, in his "Private City" (1994), also openly presents women as mere objects of desire who have no power to decide their own fate.

These openly misogynist portrayals of women in recent

Polish films clash with the depiction of independent and intelligent women presented in previous years in the films of Andrzej Wajda and Barbara Sass. In the '70s Andrzej Wajda, the father of "the school of moral concern,"¹ created the figure of the young, educated woman for whom there existed no obstacles in getting to the crux of political truth. Another film director of this period, Barbara Sass,² also produced films about ambitious women who braved the world in search of financial and political success. These women are presented as powerful individuals treated as equals by their male counterparts.

On the one hand, there is a career woman who is aware of the constitutional right to gender equality; and on the other hand, woman as object, woman as house-wife, woman as lover, and woman as mother.

This lead of woman is epitomized on the screen by Krystyna Janda, who debuted and later starred in numerous films by Andrzej Wajda. In "Man of Marble" (1977) and "Man of Iron" (1981), Janda plays the part of an independent and intelligent political activist. As Janda explains, such a portrayal originates from a trait of overt resistance and strength which has developed in every Polish woman due to historical and social circumstances. The following excerpt from an interview with Janda in *Cineaste* is a clear indication of the complexity of women's position in Poland.

Cineaste: You have been called not only the icon of Solidarity but also of the emerging feminist consciousness in Eastern Europe. What makes your role really attractive is this feminist sensibility which is really quite unprecedented in Polish film. You play very decisive women fighting not for some stereotypical set of values but for a deeply human individualism. You play strong, determined, independent-minded, and, above all, thinking women. How do you see your energetic activism on the screen as reflecting what Polish women today think?

Janda: I really believe that this strength of character comes from our tradition. In our literature or other forms of cultural expression, women are much stronger than men. The woman in her role as the mother figure is certainly cherished. In contrast, all our romantic male heroes fail. They have their weaknesses—they want to kill the tsar but they catch fever. Kordian, Konrad, Gustav—they are all weaklings. These men have terrible doubts and problems. The women, even though they don't play principal roles, are really the ones who endure, who wait, who suffer, who really make do under trying circumstances. Women are

marginal but strong. There are no winners in our tradition as far as the hero is concerned but the women hold their own. (Szporer 12)

To Polish spectators, Janda epitomizes the generation of the revolutionary intelligentsia whose stamina and bravery led to the official abolition of the socialist system in 1989. The fact that she was a young woman was irrelevant in this context, as both women and men were equally engaged in the revolutionary developments. Especially in the late 1970s and in the '80s it was Janda and other women like her who were seen by the general public as a symbol of a contemporary Polish woman. In the context of this predominantly positive depiction, the offensive beer poster appearing in Polish cities almost twenty years later introduces a moment of disruption in the consistently affirmative depiction of women in the Polish official cultural discourse.

The demeaning and sexist portrayal of women in Polish films and media is a natural follow-up to the political and economical scenario evolving in the 1990s. Since 1989, the rise of patriarchy has been stimulated by the changing political, economical, and social relations which signified the abolition of state planned production and the introduction of the market economy. The latter uses primitive techniques to eliminate the weakest members of the society. Women, children, the disabled, and the sick have to be disposed of in a more or less open manner. At the same time, however, the Polish woman of the '70s and the '80s—-independent, educated and liberated from the constraints of patriarchy—fight for a come back. This conflicting ideological perspective is evident in recent films. On the one hand, there is a strong, independent woman who knows what she wants from life, a career woman who is aware of the constitutional right to gender equality at work that the post-war Poland guaranteed; and on the other hand, woman as object, woman as house-wife, woman as lover, and woman as mother. The blend of these two types of roles in many Polish films is the source of interesting contradictions and tensions, especially in those films in which women are depicted as trying to balance their professional careers with the traditional roles of wife, mother, and lover.

An example of such a film is a comedy by Roman Zaluski, "Marriage Comedy" (1994). Unable to function as a professional at home, the protagonist leaves her family and engages in a full-time career elsewhere. When she finally returns to her husband and children, she finds her family transformed into an open-minded group of people willing to help their mother and wife with household chores, and in so doing, stimulating her professional career. Patriarchy transformed, a theme prevalent in such Hollywood melodramas as "Kramer vs Kramer" (Robert Benton, 1979) and "Ordinary People" (Robert Redford, 1981), is replayed in this recent Polish film with an uncanny resemblance to the American scenario.

"Marriage Comedy" is especially interesting for yet

another reason. It presents female sexuality as non-threatening to males, and as a positive element in a woman's life. In this film, the female protagonist is fully aware of her attractiveness and of her sexuality. Unlike the films of Pasikowski and Skalski, "Marriage Comedy" treats a woman as a sexual subject with warmth and understanding. Such a mature treatment of female sexuality constitutes a refreshing new element in the handling of sex in Polish films. Generally speaking, until the end of the '80s sexuality had been either non-existent or highly romanticized in state-sanctioned Polish films and media.

The socialist system, with its ban on all publications related to sex issues and strong censorship of soft and hard pornography, eliminated the depiction of women as sexual subjects from all cultural arenas.

In the films of socialist realism in the '50s, for instance, sexual acts were treated by the socialist ideology as bourgeois, decadent undertakings thwarting industrial productivity. In such films of the period as "Not Far From Warsaw" (Maria Kaniewska, 1954), "Difficult Love" (Stanislaw Rozewicz, 1954), or "An Adventure at Mariensztat" (Leonard Buczkowski, 1953) women are presented as workers who share the burden of building a socialist Poland with other workers, male and female. The socialist system, with its ban on all publications related to sex issues and strong censorship of soft and hard pornography, literally eliminated the depiction of women as sexual subjects from almost all cultural arenas. This trend has persisted in the official cultural discourse for many years.

Women as sexual subjects are also non-existent in films based on literary adaptations. In these films, women are stereotypically presented as beautiful objects of desire, constantly pursued by men but usually rendered powerless by a patriarchal system. These women cannot choose another path of development and growth. As Krystyna Janda has stated in a *Cineaste* interview, women were usually "flowers to look at and admire which just floated across the screen and really didn't hold power" (Szporer 13). In all these films, the undercurrent of misogyny is present albeit carefully concealed by the veil of Polish romanticism and a Slavic form of gallantry which originated in seventeenth century France.

As a subversive response to the official ban on sexuality, the vulgar representation of female sexuality flourished in the unofficial media, in crude "jokes" told by men both orally and through cartoons. In all these "jokes," women are depicted as voluptuous lovers, stereotypically blonde and stupid, or as asexual subservient wives and mothers unable to "manage" marriages or households.

To recapitulate, women in Polish films of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s: the workers in socialist realist films; the romantic,

powerless women in film adaptations of literary works; independent, intelligent women of the "school of moral concern"; stereotypical dumb blondes in sexual jokes, are responsible for the contradictory representation, on the one hand, of powerful, independent women and, on the other, of women deeply inscribed within the patriarchal system.

Women of the '90s: the aggressive businesswoman, as portrayed in the comedy by Filip Bajon "It Is Better To Be Beautiful and Rich" (1994); professional women and housewives juggling career and home; sexual objects in the films of Wladyslaw Pasikowski and Jacek Skalski constitute an extension of the earlier stereotypes. Sad as it seems, however, the overtly misogynist presentation of women is significantly more dominant in recent films, although sometimes obscured by the comedic, horror or action film genre, transported from the American film. In these outdated depictions of women, their professional and social status is rendered irrelevant and gives way to explicitly sexual presentations which feed on the fetishistic and voyeuristic desires of male audiences. The patriarchal ideology, so far carefully obscured by the political aims of socialism, lurks behind these images and manifests its increasingly palpable presence in the Polish culture.

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¹The "school of moral concern" is a name given to a group of film makers in the late '70s and in the early '80s who, in their films, protested the political and social situation in Poland. The most important representatives of this school are Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Feliks Falk, and Krzysztof Zanussi.

²All the films of Barbara Sass deal with the psychological problems of contemporary Polish women. In "Without Love" (1980), "The D butante" (1981), "The Shout" (1983), "The Girls From Nowolipki" (1986), "The Paradisical Appletree" (1986), "In the Cage" (1987) and in "An Immoral Story" (1990), the director presents women as sexual and social subjects who openly disclose their feelings towards the social situation they find themselves in and towards the men they share their lives with. Without exception, Barbara Sass's films are explicit comments on the loves and lives of contemporary women in Poland.

References

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