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## At the Crossroads of Gender, Power and Audiovisual Culture: Female Politicians and Businesswomen as Represented in Polish Cinema after 1989

**Władza, płęć i kultura audiowizualna. Wizerunki kobiet polityków i bizneswoman w kinie polskim po 1989 roku**

### • Abstract •

Contemporary discourse on gender equality in the mass media focuses primarily on analysing news programmes, TV series and advertisements. However, films also constitute powerful cultural stimuli, capable of modifying the attitudes and behaviour of both audiences and the society as a whole. The strength and longevity of their impact lie in their deep roots in the culture in which they operate. For cinematic representations of women and men, this process implies the need to constantly refer to a certain stock of conventions, cultural stereotypes and ways of thinking about gender present in the mentality and social structures of a given community. The same applies to images of women in power in film, which on the one hand are determined by cultural patterns attributed to each gender, while on the other they themselves contribute to their perpetuation in the social consciousness, at the same time creating social images of relations between gender and power in political and economic life. The article discusses this phenomenon in relation to selected Polish films after 1989. The paper will analyse how the roles and behavioural patterns attributed to

### • Abstrakt •

We współczesnym dyskursie na temat równości płci w środkach masowego przekazu przeważają analizy dotyczące programów informacyjnych, seriali oraz reklam. Silnymi bodźcami kulturowymi, zdolnymi do modyfikowania postaw i zachowań zarówno widzów, jak i całego społeczeństwa, są jednak również filmy. O sile i trwałości ich oddziaływania stanowi głębokie zakorzenienie w kulturze, w której ramach funkcjonują. Dla filmowych reprezentacji kobiet i mężczyzn proces ten oznacza potrzebę nieustannego odwoływania się do pewnego zasobu konwencji, kulturowych stereotypów i sposobów myślenia o płci obecnych w mentalności i strukturach społecznych danej wspólnoty. Tak dzieje się również w przypadku ekranowych wizerunków kobiet sprawujących władzę, które z jednej strony determinowane są kulturowymi schematami przypisanymi obu płciom, z drugiej zaś – same przyczyniają się do ich utrwalenia w społecznej świadomości, kreując jednocześnie społeczne wyobrażenia na temat relacji płci i władzy w życiu politycznym i gospodarczym. Artykuł omawia rzeczony zjawisko w odniesieniu do wybranych polskich filmów po 1989 roku.

women were (re)defined in the (changing) public sphere and what the position of characters representing these characteristics was in the narrative of the films.

Analizie zostanie poddany sposób (re)definiowania przypisywanych kobietom ról i wzorców zachowań w (zmieniającej się) sferze publicznej oraz usytuowanie reprezentujących powyższe cechy postaci w narracji filmowej.

**Keywords:** gender equality; power; public sphere; images of women; contemporary Polish film; symbolic transformation

**Słowa kluczowe:** równość płci; władza; sfera publiczna; wizerunki kobiet; współczesny film polski; transformacja symboliczna

The political transformation [...] cannot be fully achieved without the emancipation of excluded identities and without true diversity on the political scene. There can be no doubt that we need a modern gender equality policy, with gender quotas used as its tool. However, political transformation must also be complemented by a symbolic transformation. This cultural effort is something that we are yet to tackle.

Maria Janion

According to contemporary research perspectives, the cultural context has a dominant impact on the attitudes and behaviour of individuals and social groups. As argued by Stuart Hall, the ideology contained within the context is a framework of presumptions, images and concepts, which we deploy in order to “represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspects of social existence” (1995, p. 18). However, the norms that operate within this framework often remain obscure, and thus also rarely questioned. Annette Kuhn even states that ideology designs us to such an extent that the representations of reality we create are almost completely naturalised: “we take our conception of the world for granted” (1994, p. 4). The emergence and crystallisation of the democratic system following the political transformation in Poland at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s was a unique opportunity for observing processes that took place both in the behaviour of people and their attitudes and values. As noted by Małgorzata Radkiewicz: “1989 was a turning point in Polish history, initiating changes not only in politics and economics, but above all in the everyday life of Polish society, its mentality, customs and ways of perceiving the world. There was a shift in the way people perceived reality, where issues that had previously not been subject to any analysis suddenly appeared – or rather were finally noticed”<sup>1</sup> (2002, p. 5).

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from this and other Polish texts are my own translations.

Of particular attention in this regard are social attitudes and beliefs concerning the sphere of public life, where gender remains a differentiating factor and which is traditionally seen as a predominantly male area. The equality of men and women in all spheres of social life, emphasised under the previous regime, meant that members of society often took propaganda slogans as a description of actual social relations, although their own observations and experiences diverged from the officially proclaimed rules. Only the development of “democratic mechanisms of competition and rivalry in both economic and political life enabled at least some members of society to realise that actual relations were far from equal” (Siemieńska, 2000, p. 7; see also: Baer, 2014). Active participation in the creation of civic society as well as promoting and reinforcing democratic principles, including equality as one of its fundamental tenets, therefore became one of the primary roles of Polish media after 1989.

The current discourse on gender equality in the media is essentially limited to highlighting the under-representation of women in newscasts and current affairs programmes (see: Zatwarnicka-Madura, 2016; Mannila, 2017; Dhoest, Panis, & Paulussen, 2022), and analysing their images in TV series (see: Sojak, Meler, & Królicka, 2020; Różalska, 2020) and TV or newspaper advertisements (see: Zotos & Tsihla, 2014; Brzoza, 2019). However, film also plays an important cultural role by showing viewers an image of the world, creating models and defining consciousness, thus shaping the social understanding of certain aspects of the surrounding reality.<sup>2</sup> The strength and longevity of a film’s impact are determined by the fact that it draws inspiration for its images from the culture in which it operates. As noted by Jurij Lotman: “The ability of the cinema text to absorb the semiotics of everyday relationships, national and social traditions means that it is saturated with the overall, non-artistic codes of the times to a much greater degree than any theatrical presentation can be. Cinematography is more closely tied to that life which exists beyond the limits of art” (1981, p. 88).

A world otherwise familiar to the viewer therefore permeates the film, lending further credibility to its message and allowing the viewer to believe in the authenticity of the characters, places and events it depicts. For cinematic representations of men and women, this process implies a constant reference to a certain stock of conventions, cultural stereotypes and ways of thinking about gender present in the

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<sup>2</sup> Aleksander Jackiewicz, a prominent film theoretician and critic, also noted the role of film in the creation of culture: “When I say that film is first and foremost a piece of culture, what I mean is that film is both art, often great art, [...] and a source of knowledge. In this sense, film is a powerful tool in social development. This is something that we often say, but we are not yet able to make sufficient use of its power” (1983, p. 474).

mentality and social structures of a given community. The same applies to images of women in power in film, which on the one hand are determined by cultural patterns attributed to each gender, while on the other they themselves contribute to their perpetuation in the social consciousness, at the same time creating social images of relations between gender and power in political and economic life. Further in this paper I would like to discuss this phenomenon in relation to selected Polish films made after 1989. The analysis will focus on the way women's roles and behaviours are portrayed in the public sphere, which is a product of resentment towards women and which is shared by a significant part of the contemporary Polish film community. The role played by characters representing the above characteristics in the film narrative will also be considered.

The following films will be used as primary research material: *Koniec gry* (*The Game Is Over*, 1991, dir. Feliks Falk), *Komedia małżeńska* (*Marriage Comedy*, 1993, dir. Roman Załuski) and *Dzieci i ryby* (*Children and Fish*, 1996, dir. Jacek Bromski); I will also touch upon *Lepiej być piękną i bogatą* (*It's Better to Be Pretty and Rich*, 1993, dir. Filip Bajon) and *Tato* (*Dad*, 1995, dir. Maciej Ślesicki). All of the above films are part of the Polish popular cinema of the 1990s. They are distinguished, but at the same time limited (especially in terms of numbers) by the central role played in the narrative by women with clear aspirations for careers in business and politics. Moreover, the protagonist's transgressions against culturally conditioned roles and behaviours ascribed to each gender are a central theme of each of these films. It is worth emphasising that the choices made by women in the films are accepted by other characters and, one can assume, by the filmmakers themselves only as long as they do not threaten the traditional way of perceiving women in society. The unequivocally negative image of women pursuing careers in public life that can be seen in the films seems to persist in Polish cinematography to this day, while the extremely interesting issue of transgressing gender boundaries, including ways of reconciling family and professional responsibilities, ceased to be a subject of interest for Polish filmmakers at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

After 1989, the Polish film industry found itself in a rather peculiar situation. The economic collapse of the 1980s and the political changes that took place in 1989 forced significant transformations in both the structure of production and financing, and in ways of communicating with the public. The artists' way of thinking and the range of topics they addressed also changed significantly. The most popular central theme of films made up until then, an enemy in the form of a totalitarian state, suddenly disappeared, and the problems faced in everyday life by ordinary people turned out to be completely different from those they had experienced before (Haltorf, 2004, pp. 215–219). In search of inspiration for their films, directors and

scriptwriters began to draw more and more often on the surrounding reality, in line with the then prevailing view that “Polish cinema stands a chance of survival and development only when it is national in character, when it arises directly from the traditions, culture and myths forming Polish awareness” (Skwara, 1992, p. 230). In addition to settling accounts with recent history, the struggle of Poles with their new social realities therefore became one of the leading themes tackled by films. Women often became the protagonists of plots of these films, which was partly related to their increasing presence in public life and partly to the phenomenon described by Renata Siemieńska as follows: “[C]hanges in political systems and the emergence of new power groups claiming adherence to new ideologies are usually accompanied by the creation of new images of women through the use of state-controlled mass media. The images are intended to emphasise the depth of the changes which – according to the new group in power – will encompass the whole of society and symbolise the new aspirations and social changes that are part of the ideology being promoted” (2001, p. 14). It is worth recalling that a similar phenomenon took place in Poland in the past, in the early 1950s, when the socialist regime used the media to persistently promote among the society the model of a super-woman who was “fully politically conscious [...], and actively participated in the process of building a better reality” (Zwierzchowski, 2000, p. 453).

In terms of cinematic portrayals of Polish women, the political turning point of 1989 meant a departure from the traditional image of the Polish Mother, a national icon of femininity who found fulfilment in motherhood and was tasked with taking care of the family home,<sup>3</sup> and a shift towards depictions of strong, independent and uncompromising women, often even ruthless and calculating; of note is the fact that women on the screen were nearly always presented as a threat to the male order. Film representations of female politicians and businesswomen are of particular interest here; they are characters who – in pursuing their professional aspirations within the new economic and political system – not only entered the masculine territory of leadership in politics and business, but also “took up the gauntlet and became a threat” (Stachówna, 2001, p. 58). Female characters in leading roles are portrayed by male directors with fascination and admiration, but at the same time with apparent fear and dislike, usually as self-interested, cold and lacking in typical female qualities: sensitivity, gentleness and understanding. However, they are also

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<sup>3</sup> The overwhelming – and often metaphysical – presence of the myth of the Polish Mother in Polish culture and the origins of this phenomenon, which is linked to the culture of the nobility, Catholicism and folk culture, is discussed extensively by Elżbieta Ostrowska (1997, 2004) and Joanna Sz wajcowska (2006).

ambitious, desirable, energetic, dominant, often merciless in their judgement and conduct.

An eccentric member of the Parliamentary Women's Circle, who appears as an episodic character in the extremely popular Polish film *Dad* by Maciej Ślesicki, is an exceptional representative of women active in public life. Her appearance itself can evoke negative feelings in the viewer: short red-orange hair, striking eyeglass frames and heavy make-up. However, the director goes a step further by giving the viewer a ready-made interpretation of the character. The activist who lobbies for an increased presence of women in politics appears on a TV news programme watched by Cezary Kujawski (Cezary Pazura), a friend of the protagonist. As a comment on the lack of women in leadership positions, the man shouts towards the TV: "You are not there because you all are too stupid!" Then he adds, turning to his friend (Bogusław Linda): "Would you like such an idiot to be in the government?!" Given this presentation – and the clearly negative interpretation – of the image of the Polish female politician, it is unsurprising that female politicians are not esteemed or even respected by the popular opinion, and a relatively large group of Poles still express disapproval of women's participation in politics.<sup>4</sup>

The main female character in Feliks Falk's film *The Game Is Over* is certainly not an "idiot", but she also has no qualities that would make the viewer respect or admire her, let alone like her. Monika Małecka (Anna Romantowska) is a strong-minded, active middle-aged woman; she is the leader of one of the political parties running for parliament. The viewer meets her when she steals perfume while shopping in a mall. Janusz (January Brunov), a security guard infatuated with Monika, erases the recording of the crime, but continues to take an interest in the woman, which in turn arouses her suspicion. Monika is convinced that the man wants to blackmail her. When it turns out that she and her party have a good chance of winning the upcoming election, the terrified woman decides to lure him into a trap. While ensuring her own safety, she destroys the developing relationship with Janusz, who is totally devoted to her. Falk's film therefore paints the following image of a Polish female political leader: she is an anxious woman preoccupied with her professional life, discussing her problems in the psychoanalyst's office, ready to sacrifice almost everything for her political career, even happiness in her private life.

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<sup>4</sup> Poland does not compare favourably with other European countries in this respect. In 2017, as many as 27.6 per cent of Poles agreed with the statement that men are better political leaders than women (down from 38.5 per cent in 2005) (Myck, Trzeciński, & Oczkowska, 2021). Also of concern is the fact that one in four men (27 per cent) opposes a greater presence of women in politics, and one in five (20 per cent) believes that politics should remain the only-men domain; among women, similar attitudes are represented by 17 per cent and 12 per cent of respondents, respectively (CBOS, 2017).

The stereotypical nature of the presented image is evidenced by the fact that it fits into one of the two models of the role of a woman present in social consciousness. As summarised by Elżbieta T. Woźniakowa and Celina Matysiak, the first model concerns her responsibility “for bringing up children and creating a real home. The second promotes the standard of a liberated woman who fulfils her ambitions in the professional and public spheres, without the constraints of her motherly and domestic role” (2006, p. 11). However, in real life these two models are in no way mutually exclusive. In everyday life, few women want or can afford to follow only one of these models: self-fulfilment in the public sphere or full devotion to children and the home. The contrary is usually true – women pursue many different attitudes and models, often combining them. The decision made by the protagonist of *The Game Is Over* to focus solely on her professional career – although unlikely – nevertheless puts her in a lost position in the eyes of Polish viewers, for whom family is the most important value in life (see: CBOS,<sup>5</sup> 2004, 2018). To make matters worse, the politician in the film does not gain any respect in professional life either; she is self-centred, abrasive and unkind to colleagues, and most certainly does not contribute to improving public perception of women in power. It downright confirms social myths and the resulting prejudice against women in leadership positions. Research shows that when asked about the preferred gender of their supervisor, only one in ten respondents wanted to see a woman in this role in the analysed period.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the simplistic and stereotypical image of a female political leader that Falk creates in his film, we should appreciate the fact that he started a trend in Polish cinema that would last nearly a decade, where determined and strong women with clearly defined ambitions and professional goals, able to perfectly cope with the challenges of the new Polish reality, were made the centrepiece of the plot. However, protagonists of later films pursued their professional aspirations in business instead of politics. The first film made after 1989 to put a businesswoman at the centre of the plot was *It's Better to Be Pretty and Rich* by Filip Bajon. The film tells the story of a Łódź textile worker (Adrianna Biedrzyńska) who leads a strike in a declining textile factory and becomes its owner overnight. This unexpected change of roles transforms the protagonist from a striking worker into a successful manager who tenaciously fights to save the factory from bankruptcy. The somewhat fairy-tale and abstract dimension of the story, although inspired by authentic events, makes

<sup>5</sup> Public Opinion Research Centre.

<sup>6</sup> According to surveys conducted between 1993 and 2003 on the preferred gender of their supervisors, only 13 per cent (1993), 10 per cent (1998) and 13 per cent (2003) of the respondents declared that they would prefer a woman in this role. A male boss was preferred by 51, 42 and 37 per cent of the respondents, respectively (Budrowska, Duch-Krzyszczek, & Titkow, 2003, p. 290).

it more of a contemporary version of the tale of Cinderella rather than a depiction of Polish reality of the first half of the 1990s (see: Sobolewski, 1993), preventing the viewer from fully identifying not only with the main character, but also with the situations and problems shown on the screen.

Jacek Bromski's *Children and Fish* and Roman Załuski's *Marriage Comedy* are somewhat more grounded in their contemporary reality. Although the female protagonists of these films follow different paths in life, numerous parallels can be drawn in how both characters are presented and how they deal with their family and professional responsibilities. Anna Sobolewska (Anna Romantowska) and Maria Kozłowska (Ewa Kasprzyk) are middle-aged women with a stable professional position (Anna is the owner of a prosperous advertising agency) and family life (Maria is a wife and mother of three children). Although their professional situations are different, they both have problems in their personal lives: Anna is raising her adolescent daughter alone after her husband left her, while Maria's life is reduced almost exclusively to pleasing her fussy and self-centred husband and looking after their unbearable children, in line with the prevailing Polish cultural belief that "the ideal fulfilment of the marriage contract is a situation in which the woman takes care of household matters, leaving the man to function in the public sphere" (Radkiewicz, 2001, p. 46).

In line with the typical patriarchal cultural model of defining women mainly through the prism of the private sphere, both films take events in the personal lives of their protagonists as their starting point. When Anna, focused almost exclusively on her professional work, accidentally becomes pregnant with an old colleague (Krzysztof Stroiński), she initially perceives it as a disaster. However, after thinking things through, she decides to raise another child alone, firmly rejecting any possibility of a relationship with its biological father. Meanwhile, overwhelmed by her daily responsibilities, Maria decides to leave her family and unexpectedly starts to develop her professional career. As a result, she not only becomes financially independent, but also makes a genuine career for herself in the world of business. However, the subversion of cultural gender stereotypes is merely an illusion in the case of both women. The model of femininity pursued by the characters is in fact closer to the Polish Mother stereotype than to the model of a modern woman, finding fulfilment in a successful career and making independent decisions.

At the end of the 1990s, some changes took place in the way Polish filmmakers portrayed women in power; however, these changes not so much involved a transformation of the image of a female leader on the screen as a change in her position in relation to the central point of the film's plot. Although Polish filmmakers continued showing interest in the social and economic problems of the time, including



mechanisms of political life (*Pogoda na jutro/ Tomorrow's Weather*, 2003, dir. Jerzy Stuhr), opportunities and limitations created by the still developing capitalist system (*Pieniądze to nie wszystko/ Money Isn't Everything*, 2001, dir. Juliusz Machulski) or the temptations and conflicts of values inherent in the system (*Amok*, 1998, dir. Natalia Koryncka-Gruz; *Pierwszy milion/ First Million*, 2000, dir. Waldemar Dziki), the difficult economic situation in the country and the growing unemployment rate, particularly among women, contributed to the gradual marginalisation of women in public life and, consequently, in their film representations.

Women in power are therefore predominantly relegated to supporting roles in films made in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the range of positions related to managing people in which they are cast, however, remains extensive. Women leaders in films from that period include the president of a foundation (*Tydzień z życia mężczyzny/ A Week in the Life of a Man*, 1999, dir. Jerzy Stuhr), a director in a trading company (*Nie ma zmiłuj/ No Love Lost*, 2000, dir. Waldemar Krzystek), a department manager in an advertising agency, the head of a catering company (*Dlaczego nie/ Why Not*, 2007, dir. Ryszard Zatorski), the editor-in-chief of a women's magazine (*Lejdis*, 2008, dir. Tomasz Konecki), as well as a headhunter in an international corporation (*Nigdy nie mów nigdy/ Never Say Never*, 2009, dir. Wojciech Pacyna). Their attributes do not diverge, however, from the patterns adopted earlier by filmmakers – the on-screen female leaders are always represented as jealous, greedy and ruthless manipulators. Of note is the fact that female characters in films acquire their negative traits only when they assume managerial or leadership positions, as exemplified by the transformation of the main female character in *No Love Lost*. Monika Jankiewicz (Anna Piróg) is a young, slightly naive girl who unwittingly joins the “rat race” after starting work for a large trading company. As she climbs the career ladder (up to the position of director), she becomes a calculating careerist who pays no mind to other people's problems and sacrifices long-standing friendships for her position.

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The social perception of relations between gender and power in Poland is largely determined by images of men and women in leadership positions constructed by the Polish media. Meanwhile, even a cursory analysis of film representations of women in politics or business shows that they are schematic and stereotypical while simultaneously propagating negative cultural patterns. The examples of female characters active in the public sphere during the transformation period discussed in this paper prove that changes in economic and social realities were not always accompanied by equally dynamic transformations in the symbolic sphere. Moreover,

this phenomenon was also associated with the increasing marginalisation of female characters in film narrative over time. It contributed to downplaying the professional aspirations of female leaders, often reducing them to a statement that female film characters “simply work somewhere, somehow, like everyone else, being forced to do so by economic necessity” (Helman, 1991, p. 27). Transposing the above observations on the real world confirms the validity of Maria Janion’s words that democracy and power in Poland are of the masculine gender, and in the eyes of the society, a woman is a “family creature” who, instead of delving into politics and business, should look after the home (2009, par. 2), leaving the public sphere to be ruled by men.

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