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War film as a political problem in Polish press 1945–1949

While studying the usage of mainstream cinema as a medium for propaganda in early era of post-war People's Poland,¹ I have encountered the necessity for taking under consideration the significance of specific articles in the cultural press of the time. Since socialist realism was not inducted in Poland as an obligatory style of art before 1949,² there is a four-year gap between forming the Ministry for Information and Propaganda in Provisional Government of National Unity and that. That, as described in Czesław Miłosz's *The Captive Mind*, was used not only for eliminating opposition, but also for gathering support through positive propaganda and temporary loosening state censorship.

Introducing ideas of socialist realism to the public was one of the elements of this propaganda. Though not yet enforced, the new role of state-funded film industry had been emphasized since the beginning of the Polish post-war press, as I will show in the examples from periodicals such as "Film" and "Kuźnica". As time passed, the number of socialist realism-related articles increased, building a clear path from the dismissal of the pre-war free market film industry, through the introduction of the newest accomplishments of Soviet cinema (along with dismissal of its experiments of the silent era) to the full acknowledgment of its greatness and rejection of every form of non-Soviet film art (including Italian realism).

In such conditions, every critique and reaction to then-produced war films has its own significance. Reacting to most recent history was a political as well

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¹ This period has been studied thoroughly by Alina Madej in *Kino – władza – publiczność: kinematografia polska w latach 1944–1949*, Prasa Beskidzka, Bielsko-Biała 2002. See also: J. Lemann-Zajicek, *Kino i polityka: polski film dokumentalny 1945–1949*, Dział Wydawniczy PWSFTvIT, Łódź 2003; E. Zajicek, *Poza ekranem: kinematografia polska 1918–1991*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1992, p. 35–87; A. Misiak, *Kinematograf kontrolowany: cenzura filmowa w kraju socjalistycznym i demokratycznym (PRL i USA)*, Universitas 2006, p. 71–102. See also eadem, *Aleksander Ford and Film Censorship in Poland*, "Kinema", Fall 2003, p. 19–31.

² I treat Congress of Filmmakers in Wisła (October 17th–20th 1949) as a symbolic borderline, remembering, that matter-of-factly socialist realism was known and used in Polish cinema before that meeting – which first and foremost goal was to discipline filmmakers and scriptwriters (see A. Madej, *Zjazd filmowy w Wiśle, czyli dla każdego coś przyrego*, "Kwartalnik Filmowy" 1994, no. 5.)

as psychological must-do. As the state funded film industry of the time was under direct supervision of Ministry of Propaganda, one of its goals was to provide the expected interpretation of the years under German occupation, the existence of death camps and the activities of the Polish underground resistance. The demand for war stories was undeniable – all that was needed was a direction.

A great example for such conducted demand was one of numerous commentaries to Wanda Jakubowska's *Last Stage (Ostatni etap, 1947)* printed at the time when this first feature movie about Auschwitz was still in production. Krystyna Żywulska's article published in bimonthly, "Film" was entitled: *For those who do not know. Reflections on Auschwitz*.³ Żywulska was then known as a writer of the memoirs: *I survived Auschwitz*⁴ as well as several camp-related poems – thus her opinion on forms of representation of camp life would have been publicly recognized. Her main voiced concern was that any such representation needs to have a certain meaning. Its purpose is to inspire the same disgust for war that camp survivors feel. The need for such message is emphasized by the writer's argument that the recently acquired peace is endangered by countries involved in the reconstruction of the German state – with the exception of the Soviet Union. In such circumstances Żywulska creates a necessity for a politically committed message about Auschwitz; a message that would not only be able to express the horror of the death camps but would also point towards the proper culprits.⁵ A year after publication of her memoirs, Żywulska in this article about the movie in production is mostly concerned about the usage of film as a medium for propaganda. This is what she expects from the first fictional film about a death camp and that is what she will get. *The Last Stage* certainly was a message which first function was persuasion, not reflection. A publically expressed demand was fulfilled.

It is important to remember though, that certain voices and opinions were published and others were not – that was a tool used for engineering the sense of consensus. Discussions in the press did not reflect the whole spectrum of reactions to the notion of soviet cinema as the highest form of film art. But it is worth mentioning that cinema had essentially different status than forms of art that did not involve similar financial commitment to produce it (like literature or sculpture). The transformation from the pre-war commercial film industry to a state-funded model reactivated the idea of film as a work created to serve society which funded it through taxes and ticket costs. Reading "Film" periodical from years 1946–49 leads me to the conviction that many parts of this medium were used to inform at first, and then to convince readers, that socialist realism was the finest and most responsible form of art.

³ K. Żywulska, *Dla tych, którzy nie wiedzą. Refleksje na temat Oświęcimia*, "Film" 1947, no. 31/32. All press articles titles and citations if not mentioned otherwise are translated by me.

⁴ *Eadem, I survived Auschwitz*, trans. K. Cenkalska, Dom Wydawniczy tCHu, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Warszawa–Oświęcim 2004.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

First months of “Film” periodical

The aforementioned bimonthly was created within the structure of the monopolist which controlled Polish film industry. “Film Polski”, as it was named, was a company created in 1945 to gather every aspect of film production, distribution, and screening under its supervision. Reading the articles in the first issues of “Film” shows that the main goal of this periodical was, to publish news about successful implementations of the company’s strategies, plans for film production several years ahead and, most of all, polemics with criticism printed in several other newspapers.

“Film Polski”, managed by Aleksander Ford (1945–1947) was a target of criticism from multiple angles. None of them was a critique of direction in which post-war Polish cinema was heading – that is the nationalization of the industry and recreating it as an instrument for propaganda. Among the loudest critics of Ford’s management were Jalu Kurek and Antoni Bohdziewicz. In 1946, Kurek, a former futurist, writer, translator and occasional filmmaker [*OR – obliczenia rytmiczne* (Rhythmical Calculations), 1933] published a series of questions to “Film Polski” management in “Dziennik Ludowy” (PSL’s, agrarian opposition party’s newspaper):

- “Why there are no new Polish films in cinemas, while Italy and Czechoslovakia, who started after us, have already launched their production?”;
- “Why doesn’t Aleksander Ford practice filmmaking, and Stanisław Wohl practice cinematography?”;
- “What happened to the film *2*2* by Antoni Bohdziewicz and why is the screenplay by *Robinson warszawski* by Jerzy Andrzejewski and Czesław Miłosz not in production?”;
- “Why there is still no film about Warsaw, nor one about war partisans?”;
- “Why there are no travelogues about the beauty of Polish mountains? No documentaries about [...] the industry of reclaimed Silesia nor about the widened coastline?”;
- “Is there any film about land reform? About village children learning in schools created in noblemen’s palaces?”.⁶

Those questions, immediately answered by Jerzy Bossak in “Film”, show leftist artists’ expectations as well as Ford’s “Film Polski” politics and its consequences. Post-war cinema was supposed to be useful – thus it should have produced films about social and political changes in People’s Poland and about the past war. Kurek criticizes Ford’s inability to fulfill these expectation. Critics agreed that the director’s talents would have been better exploited if he rather focused on film-making. Ford proved to be an inept administrator,⁷ not

⁶ J. Bossak, *Fałszywa troska o film*, “Film” 1946, no. 2.

⁷ E. Zajiček, *op. cit.*, p. 61–66.

able to deal with the day to day paperwork.⁸ Another problem were the massive delays in film production caused by the indecisiveness of people hired to evaluate scripts and the constantly changing ideological specifications of central government. Thus was the case with *2*2=4* (1945, dir. Antoni Bohdziewicz), which was permanently excluded from public screening and of Andrzejewski's and Miłosz' script which was rewritten until it was unrecognizable by its authors and finally made into a film in 1950 (*Miasto nieujarzmione*, dir. Jerzy Zarzycki).

Bohdziewicz's feud with Ford and other 1930s START (Society of the Enthusiasts for the Artistic Film) veterans (Cekalski, Toeplitz, Jakubowska) was on the other hand used by editors of the weekly "Kuźnica", where he published his criticism of "Film Polski". The earliest example of their discord was in 1935, when a series of articles were printed in other "Film" periodical, controlled by START followers, condemning Bohdziewicz's 'harmful', as it was described, work as state censor.⁹ Differences that could have been washed away by war and the occupation of 1939–45 had in fact become more acute because of Bohdziewicz's involvement with the Home Army (Armia Krajowa) and making newsreels during the Warsaw Uprising 1944 – activities that were condemned by representatives of the new reign supported by the Soviet Union (part of which was Ford). Considering that circumstance one must realize how bold Bohdziewicz was being when he criticized Ford personally in print and think of the Marxist newspaper's agenda when it came to the usage of AK veteran as a weapon against the unpopular head of the film industry.

The criticism of the director of *2*2* was strictly organizational. In the first in his series of articles (incidentally printed in the same month as one of Aleksander Ford's rare publications in his own defense¹⁰) Bohdziewicz proves that the assumption distributed by "Film Polski" – everything the Polish cinema needs to ensure a high artistic level is a modern operational – is wrong. He emphasises the need to educate new generations of film makers.¹¹ In his next article, Bohdziewicz criticised Toeplitz and his ideas for evaluating film scripts.¹² In 1947, he began a frontal assault by claiming that for two years "Film Polski" had been unable to form any kind of plan of production.¹³

⁸ As Zajiček claims in an unpublished interview from 2013, main reason for dismissing Ford from his position was inability to prepare documentation for film industry's involvement in three-year plan in 1947.

⁹ J. Reichman, *Cztery oblicza cenzora Bohdziewicza*, "Film" 1935, no. 3. Other article on same subject is mentioned, supposedly published in no 1,2/35, unfortunately that issue is lost. In no 3/36 there is an anonymous note: "With sincere satisfaction we inform that mr Antoni Bohdziewicz, member of Evaluation Commission [...] whose harmful activities we have been fighting in series of articles has left his position. We wish him good luck in different fields of work".

¹⁰ A. Ford, *O Filmie Polskim i jego krytykach*, "Kuźnica" 1946, no. 8.

¹¹ A. Bohdziewicz, *Film Polski na cenzurowanym!*, "Kuźnica" 1946, no. 10. It is worth mentioning that film workshops for youth conducted in Kraków by Bohdziewicz and Wohl have been closed few months before this publication while Film School in Łódź was not opened until 1948.

¹² Idem, *Gdzie filmowy Achilles ma piętę?*, "Kuźnica" 1946, no. 25.

¹³ Idem, *Filmowe marzenia i sny*, "Kuźnica" 1947, no. 17.

In such circumstances, the periodical “Film”, founded in 1946, initially had one specific goal: to answer criticism. Thus in the first issues Jerzy Bossak, its editor-in-chief, published two extended articles¹⁴ that recaptured the basic assumptions that were foundations for the development of a nationalized cinema and disproved every imaginable criticism both from radical and conservative side. Much of the criticism was dealt with by discrediting the critics,¹⁵ and through satire.¹⁶ Only after that was dealt with, did propagating socialist realism become the publishers’ first goal.

New cinema, new theme

Even before “Film” bimonthly was created, several hints about how the development post-war film industry was to be managed are to be found. On July 1945, Jerzy Toeplitz explained in “Kuźnica” what the goals of new Polish cinema would be. After denouncing pre-war film as worthless ideologically as well as formally, he expressed his wishes: “*These days, newspapers and schools these days cannot function like grocery shops, places of merchandise and profit for the private owner, however, film, the greatest instrument of influence on the masses, cannot be treated like this. Let’s emphasize this: new Polish cinema will be a tool for purposeful propaganda*”.¹⁷

What is “purposeful propaganda”? It is worth pointing out that Toeplitz uses that phrase with positive connotations. One needs to remember that the START’s original name was supposed to be the Society for the **Propaganda** of the Artistic Film.¹⁸ What Cękałski, Toeplitz and Jakubowska were propagating was called “useful film” (*film użyteczny*).¹⁹ I believe it is fair to point out that their main concern was not realism in film art but rather its utility. This was to materialize in fictional film the main goal of which was not to realistically reflect the world, but to show the world as it should look like – in one’s ideological view.

Before any example from Polish feature film could have been made, there was a need to look for outside examples. Soviet cinema was an obvious source of inspiration though not the only one. 122217611 The first to describe it

¹⁴ J. Bossak, *op. cit.*; idem, editorial, “Film” 1946, no. 1.

¹⁵ Anonymous, *Książka zażaleń*, “Film” 1946, no. 2, photo of a big house with caption: “Villa bought by Minkiewicz with money from jokes about *kinofikacja*” (term used to describe an action towards increasing number of cinemas in small towns).

¹⁶ Idem, in which a character of humble civil servant Puciolek, inventor of the word *kinofikacja*, was created.

¹⁷ J. Toeplitz, *Nowy film polski*, “Kuźnica” 1945, no. 2.

¹⁸ Name never used in the thirties because the usage of the word “propaganda” prevented the Society from being registered.

¹⁹ In most post-war memoirs, the idea was being called *film społecznie użyteczny* – socially useful film. In fact though word “socially” was added *post factum* to increase the idea’s timeliness in late forties and fifties: A. Mucha-Świeżyńska, *Powikłane drogi. Rozmowa ze Stanisławem Wohlem*, “Kino” 1984, no. 11.

appeared in *The Turning point* (*Velikiy perelom*, 1946) by Fridrich Ermler – cited as a point on a road towards “true artistic film about war, treating its greatest problems deeply”.²⁰ But in the same issue Jerzy Giżycki made just as enthusiastic notes about *In which we serve* by David Lean (1942).²¹ Also, several articles in “Film” throughout the first year of the magazine’s existence were devoted to praising and analysing the Swiss production *The Last Chance* (*Die Letzte Chance*, 1945) by Leopold Lindtberg.²² This film, which portrayed the escape of a group of Allies from a prison camp in Italy, was even shown as a model way of depicting camp life in an emotionally engaging way, for Jakubowska’s later made film about Auschwitz.

In the same year, 1946, “Kuznica” published an article: *New ways of soviet film* by Czesław Miłosz. It contains the earliest (which I have found) use of the term “socialist realism” in the Polish post-war press with reference to film. Miłosz begins with a brief history of soviet cinema beginning with Dziga Vertov and film editing theorists, with a turning point in which formalist art was condemned and replaced with this new realism:

Formalistic leaning had been violently condemned by Russian art and was replaced by the principle of socialist realism. The principle was correct even if the right expression of realism was not found immediately. Associated arts [*sztuki relacjonujące*] such as literature or film indeed have to establish their roots into life, they need to be witnesses to their era or will wither in ivory towers. [...] But it is easy to be led astray to the opposite extremity, wherein lie dangers of naturalism.²³

Further on he quotes Eisenstein from before 1939: his criticism of both the notion that montage is “everything” and “nothing”, which dialectically leads to the halfway point, where editing is just one of the elements of the film. Next Miłosz concludes that soviet realism is not as orthodox as it used to be and as such can be accepted. As a piece of art made, he says, on public order, realistic film has its place in the new society, and is excused for using “primitive catches”.²⁴

None of the newspapers known to me discussed changes in national cinema. “Dziennik Ludowy” focused on, as I said, criticizing the lack of progress in moviemaking. In the same manner, Antoni Bohdziewicz was using “Kuznica” as a battle arena for his fight against Aleksander Ford personally. What should be mentioned is the long-lasting campaign in “Tygodnik Powszechny” concerning realism in literature. Its highlight was in my opinion Stefan Kisielewski’s bold defense of entertainment. Countering the common conviction that literature’s first post-war duty is to make a testimony of recent horrors he wrote:

²⁰ Anonymous, *Wielki przełom*, “Film” 1946, no. 3.

²¹ J. Giżycki, *Nasz okręt*, “Film” 1946, no. 3.

²² J. Toeplitz, *Powojenne oblicze filmu*, “Film” 1946, no. 1: “May the fact that it [Lindtberg’s film] is distributed by American company Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer vouch for its weight”.

²³ C. Miłosz, *Przemiany w filmie radzieckim*, “Kuznica” 1946, no. 31.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

I do believe that in this case, artists need to be guided by the specific instinct of the masses of receivers. The receiver first of all wants relaxation, then he wants to gain his area of psychological freedom. Only after that does he want art. [...] I do realize that the slogan “Art for art’s sake” meets with outrage today. It is the outcome of improper expression: it is certainly not art for art’s sake, but art for the building of human culture, for the enrichment of the human psyche. [...] For sure the exact description of torture or operations is always shocking and depressing. It is especially so for those who survived it. But would that be an artistic action? Certainly not!²⁵

Film, yet, seemed not worthy of his concern. Only a text concerning film production (excluding a few reviews) was published in May 1945, written by young Leszek Krówczyński (one-time collaborator who happened to become a well-known pharmacologist later). Krówczyński, who wrote as a spokesman for the generation of conservative ‘twenty-somethings’ from Kraków, contrary to Toeplitz and Bossak pointed at some formal values that Polish pre-war film might have had (like good cinematography in Testament profesora Wilczura, 1939, Buczkowski), but agreed with them on the necessity for nationalizing the film industry and the implementation of censorship. Moreover yet, he demanded: “*Show us the real face of a peasant, worker, and the common man. Do not give us degenerates and antiques from the past – no more aristocrats. Do not encourage the youth to follow criminal paths by showing them the underworld. Show us healthy people – as the majority is **and as everyone should be** [put in bold by me – TR]. Film should be a teacher, because it has a tremendous influence on viewers, especially the young*”.²⁶

This quote shows, I believe, the wide consensus on the usage of state-funded cinema. It also falsifies the claim that the reason why the Polish film industry was developed in Łódź, not in Kraków, was because of the inborn aversion of its conservative middle class to propaganda.

Change coming

From 1947, the tone of articles started to change. First, there was criticism towards *Forbidden songs* (*Zakazane piosenki*, 1946, Buczkowski). Adam Ważyk in “*Kuźnica*” wrote that this movie did not capture the meaning of the transformation of society during the occupation.²⁷ Jerzy Bossak called it a failure, but also a necessary step towards changes.²⁸ The soon released *Jasne Łany* by Eugeniusz Cękański was met with similar reservation. Then came criticism from the newspaper “*Głos Robotniczy*” – which was accusing editors of “*Film*” of “lacking a strong ideological spine and a healthy approach

²⁵ S. Kisielewski, *Tematy wojenne*, “*Tygodnik Powszechny*” 1945, no. 9. It is worth noticing that Kisielewski’s article ended with an appendix: “Editors’ board do not share all of the author’s convictions”.

²⁶ L. Krówczyński, *O przyszłość polskiego filmu*, “*Tygodnik Powszechny*” 1945, no. 8.

²⁷ A. Ważyk, *Pierwszy pełny metraż krajowy*, “*Kuźnica*” 1947, no. 4.

²⁸ Anonymous, *Dyskusja o pierwszym filmie*, “*Film*” 1947, no. 12.

to questions of film”.²⁹ After that warning approach the periodical has indeed become more direct. In May, Leon Bukowiecki in article *Social tendencies in movies* was criticizing American cinema (with exceptions for Charlie Chaplin and Frank Capra), Jean Renoir’s *Grand Illusion*, and emphasized the development of social tendencies in soviet cinema.³⁰ In the same issue, Zofia Dąbkowska in her review of *Nepokoryonnye* by Mark Donski (1945) explained, how socialist realism dialectically is the highest peak in the development of Russian culture, combining the “psychological realism of Tolstoj and Czechow, the prometheistic messianism of Puszkina and Lermontow, and finally, Majakowski. These tendencies were joined in the works of Maxym Gorki”.³¹ Two months later, Jan Łęczyca explained the history of soviet cinema in similar manner – denouncing its formalist period as a “litany of mistakes”.³²

Once, socialist realism was regarded the peak of the development of soviet cinema; there was time to juxtapose it with other tendencies visible in global contemporary cinema. In September 1948, Leon Bukowiecki published his *Three aspects of war film*, in which he analyzed different approaches to Second World War themes, by dividing them according to directors’ nationalities.

First on his list was a “mass production”. In his interpretation, war for capitalists, specifically American capitalists, was an occasion for making money which was the reason for the production of entertaining movies that were “ideologically hollow”. As an example, he used *Air Force* by Howard Hawks (1943). These productions, Bukowiecki said, met with severe reactions in Europe.

This mentioned reaction formed into, what he called, “Franco-Italian realism”. Bukowiecki decides to treat French and Italian films such as Rene Clement’s *Batallie du Rail* (1946) and *Les Maudits* (1947) and Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisà* (1946) as one phenomenon. What they have in common, says the writer, is a realistic approach to war and to Nazi occupation, but on the wrong side, they lack any proper interpretation of both. They “lack the right approach towards society and do not underline the right cause for fight” and that makes them unnecessarily pessimistic.

The third and final type of war film Bukowiecki calls a “creative school”. Without giving any titles, he cites soviet films as being as spectacular and precise as those from the United States, but showing real soldiers and leaders conscious of their goals. “Those films distinguish themselves with conscious realism, but they avoid the defeatism and pessimism typical of even the best western-European productions”.³³

In November 1948, Stanisław Grzelecki explained in “Film” the differences between Soviet and American film on basis of the portrayal of love affairs.

²⁹ “Film” 1947, no. 15.

³⁰ L. Bukowiecki, *Tendencje społeczne w filmie*, “Film” 1947, no. 17. Since that year reviewers such as Bukowiecki and Jan Łęczyca, specializing in soviet cinema, have become frequent contributors in “Film”, while Bossak ceased to publish. Soon Bossak was replaced as editor-in-chief of this magazine, and Aleksander Ford ceased to be the head of “Film Polski”.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² J. Łęczyca, *Festiwal kina radzieckiego*, “Film” 1947, no. 25.

³³ L. Bukowiecki, *3 aspekty filmów wojennych*, “Film” 1948, no. 48.

As he said: “Soviet film is not interested in psychological analysis of its heroes. Its goal is to create a healthy citizen in perfect psychic balance, aware of his role, free of inner conflicts. That is why we do not see any complications and love dramas, the basis of most American and western-European scripts”.³⁴

In 1949, just before the Congress in Wisła, all that could have been done was to compare every newly produced Polish film with perfect idealization of Soviet one. And so Leon Kaltenberg was trying to prove that *Treasue* (Skarb, 1949) by Buczkowski was a socially useful comedy.³⁵ Jerzy Kuryluk, when referring to Ford’s *Border Street*, he notices the director’s effort to include the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising into the Polish canon of insurrections, but argues, that the film favors the positive approach of the young self-aware Jewish freedom fighter and criticizes the passivity of old Lieberman.³⁶ Despite reviewers’ efforts both films will be condemned during the Congress.³⁷

Since the Congress of Filmmakers was only a formality which main goal was to discipline film industry workers, times between 1945 and 1949 were very significant. It is possible to witness slow, but well conducted process of implementing socialist realism through the lecturing of the Polish press. It should come not as a surprise that articles written by film makers who were also state officials did promote treating cinema as a tool for propaganda. It may be observed though, that this notion met no opposition in a newspaper devoted in its opposition to the communist state: “Tygodnik Powszechny” funded by the Catholic Archbishop of Kraków. It is visible that in a country where the government decided to put the film industry under the supervision of the Ministry of Propaganda there was general consensus that film is not an artform but a popular medium that may, and should be used for educational purposes. The Ministry treated it as such.

³⁴ S. Grzelecki, *Pocałunek...*, “Film” 1948, no. 52.

³⁵ L. Kaltenberg, *O skarbach fałszywych i o “Skarbie” zwyczajnym*, “Film” 1949, no. 59. That was last article on this feature published in “Film” – there never was any review.

³⁶ J. Kuryluk, *Za wolność waszą i naszą*, “Film” 1949, no. 59.

³⁷ See also A. Madej, *op. cit.*