

Polish (Post)Transitional Cinema: 1989-2004

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Summary

In 1989 the Polish People's Republic collapsed. The next 15 years were marked by social, cultural, political and economic shifts. These shifts were paralleled by changes in Polish filmmaking, which attracted little international attention in that period. Examining filmic developments during significant political, economic, social and cultural transitions offers an opportunity to trace the ways in which a cinema industry and filmic texts react and represent such transitions in a particular national context. Following from that assumption, this dissertation surveys the most potent transitional shifts and changes in collective identity as represented in Polish cinema.

The sample of films under discussion is limited to productions with significant box-office success (400 thousand to 7.2 million viewers) or films that provoked sharp critical debate in Poland. Patterns of transitional continuities and discontinuities are examined in films about the mythical Polish past, the People's Republic (PRL), films focused on the realities of transitions, and film comedies. In the historical period examined in this dissertation (1989-2004), transformations of cultural and collective identification are evident in filmic representations of nationhood, masculinity and femininity, especially in relation to the (pre-transitional) ethos of Polishness, which has its roots in Polish Romanticism and its symbols, myths and narratives.

The survey of Polish film texts and industry indicates that the period between 1989 and 2004 encompasses three stages. After the chaos of industrial destruction and cultural distraction of the first stage (1989-1994), there came a period of more conscious separation from some pre-1989 socio-cultural paradigms and more critical evaluation of the first years of Western-style democracy and capitalism (1994-1999). The third stage involved a re-examination and re-assertion of Polish collective and individual identities (1999-2004).

Submission declaration

This is to certify that
the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps,
bibliographies and appendices.

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A note on translations

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Polish language material are my own.



Preamble or redesigning Poland: 1989-2004

The following dissertation is motivated by two factors. One is the scarcity of work that analyses overall developments in Polish cinema during and after the period of political and economic transitions initiated in 1989. Another is the belief that tracing these developments should constitute a valuable record of the ways in which cinema and its particular products reflect such transitions. Polish cinema, like any other, does not exist in a vacuum. It has its base in social, cultural, political and economic structures. Its shape and products are also reflective of these structures. The argument that underpins my treatment of Polish cinema between 1989 and 2004 is defined by the social and cultural changes of the period, which are intertwined with changes of a political and economic nature. At the same time, it is the Polish cinema that is the focus of this work, rather than the plethora of Polish transformations. Thus, in order to stay within boundaries of this dissertation, and also to equip the reader with the transitional basics helpful in navigating

the complexities of filmic and cultural trends, this preamble lays the contextual foundations for what follows. Its aim is to offer a basic outline of the transformations, and to do so from the perspective that motivated my research pursuits.

The first fifteen years of democracy and newly found capitalism after 1989 changed significantly Poland's political and economic landscapes. Less remarkable on the international media scene, marked with cultural self-validation and fashionable topicalities, is that the internationally applauded democratisation and capitalisation were accompanied by a myriad of social and cultural shifts, which redesigned Poland's appearance and that of its social and cultural structures. The general principle of these shifts is similar to that of the other Eastern European states in transition. It involves the initial reformative chaos and dismantling of old structures, desperate but also enthusiastic attempts "to catch up to the West," often realised in rampant consumerism, and then painfully slow systemic consolidation and stabilisation, which goes hand in hand with the reassertion of collective identities defined in relation to Western structures and cultures, internationalisation and post-nationalism, as well as various (national) pasts.

As a Polish émigré to Australia, since 1993 I have been observing these changes from afar as well as during my annual visits to Poland. From that perspective, their staggering pace seemed to be even more exhilarating in their initial phase. On the ground level, they were visible in the evolving landscape of the streets in my hometown, Głogów, an industrial town in southwest Poland, and in Warsaw and other larger cities I visited. Freshly painted facades of commercial and residential buildings, the first Western supermarkets, the first ATMs, new television channels beyond the two available before 1989, and the absence of queues, were all signs of the new times. Changing attitudes to these transformations manifested in changing topics of conversation among my family and friends. At first, almost

univocally they embraced the transformations. Then, around 1995-1997 a schism in their attitudes to the new Polish reality became apparent. Some continued on the path to commercial and financial success, while others became increasingly disillusioned with what the new Poland had to offer them, and their lack of access to the easy life-style which only a few years back seemed a certainty.

One other way of placing myself within the political and cultural history covered by this dissertation would be to say that I spent the first 19 years of my life in the People's Republic under the leadership of Edward Gierek (1970-1980) and Wojciech Jaruzelski (1981-1990). At the time of the political shifts of 1989, I was in London working in a restaurant, learning English and being blissfully unaware of the significance of these changes. Before I emigrated to Australia in December 1993, I spent four years in and out of Poland and Australia, periodically soaking in the early achievements and failures of Polish capitalism and democracy.

A 2000 survey by the Central Bureau of Public Opinion Research (CBOP) reflects that schism. In it, 42 per cent of respondents nominated full shelves in the shops and no queues as the positive changes since 1989, while 59 per cent expressed their dissatisfaction with the growing rate of unemployment. The other sources of disappointment included increasing crime rates, general poverty, and low wages. Freedom of speech and of international movement, as well as economic and political freedoms were nominated as the best aspects of the new system.¹ In 1990, the official unemployment rate was approaching 5 per cent. In 1995, it increased to around 15 per cent, where it stabilised for about five years, to culminate in around 20 per cent between

¹ Zdzisław Pietrasiuk, "Odkurzony Peerel," *Polityka* 30, 22 July 2000, 9.

2002-2004.² What the year of 1989 brought to Poles, however, was hope fuelled by a political change of an unanticipated magnitude.

As a result of an unexpectedly overwhelming electoral victory in 1989, Poland gained its first non-communist Premier since World War II. The ease of the victory by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a main figure of the opposition, an activist of the semi-legal workers' union, Solidarity, came to the Poles as a surprise. The unpopularity of the old regime was apparently underestimated. The structure of the next year's first free presidential election worked to the advantage of a Solidarity negotiator and leader, Lech Wałęsa. In another unexpected political development, an unknown Canadian-Peruvian émigré, Stanisław Tymiński single-handedly destabilised what would have been a race between moderate Mazowiecki and revisionist and ostensibly Catholic Wałęsa. Preying on the electorate's hunger for the material benefits of capitalism, Tymiński rose on false promises of commercialised bliss to the second two-candidate stage of the elections. Instead of choosing between Wałęsa and Mazowiecki, Poles had no real choice. Wałęsa was the only option. That development could be seen as a factor in another surprising outcome of the next presidential election, when ex-Communist Aleksander Kwaśniewski was elected the President of the Third Polish Republic in 1995. The Polish peoples' gratitude to Wałęsa, once an inspirational if not revolutionary leader of Solidarity, had worn thin. At that stage, his linguistic and diplomatic aptitude inspired another type of gratitude; that his patois, which was documented in copious volumes of humorous publications, was not easily translatable into foreign languages. More significant in the political about-turn of 1995, however, was that Poles grew tired of the magnitude of the first phase of economic transformations.

² Data from Central Statistical Office of the Polish Government [Główny Urząd Statystyczny], *Information by Category*, 23 February 2005, (6 March 2005). <<http://www.stat.gov.pl/english>>.

The first years of economic and market reforms initiated in 1989 by Leszek Balcerowicz resulted in hyper-inflation, hyper-recession, with the budget deficit increasing 16-fold and retail prices rising by 244 percent in 1989 alone.³ These reforms also led to the opening up of the Polish market place to Western products and services, as well as a rapid privatisation of state assets, which involved laying off workers, and the adopting of entrepreneurial drives that frequently crossed legal boundaries. The rhetoric of these “shock-therapy” reforms borrowed from the communist “two-stage approach” that argued the interim period of economic hardship to be a necessary stage in the transition to an economically (or, in communism, ideologically) superior state of collective well-being.⁴ Yet, as with the ideal of communism, as time progressed the expected abundance for all seemed to become a more and more illusive (and elusive) goal. Instead, Poles experienced a rapidly growing disparity between the rich and the poor as well as experiencing increasing crime rates. Various mafia connections with the world of Polish politics started to shape political gossip in all strata of Polish society, and execution-style killings of curious journalists or of uncooperative witnesses were an unwelcome addition to news reports.

The growing schism between the poor and the rich was accompanied by other social or sociological shifts. Traditionally, wealth in Polish culture is not a virtue. That attitude to it permeates Polish literature and the poorer strata of Polish society.⁵ A comprehensive study by Hanna Palska on poverty and affluence and the associated new life styles in Poland at the end of the 1990s, segments the poor and the rich by their attitudes. In her analysis, Palska

³ Ben Slay, *The Polish Economy. Crisis, Reform and Transformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 86.

⁴ Renata Salecl, *The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis and Feminism after the Fall of Socialism* (London: Routledge, 1994), 89.

⁵ Grażyna Skłipska, ed., *Bieda i bogactwo w polskiej kulturze i świadomości* (Cracow: TAIWPN, 2003).

notes that the only consumer-based choice available to the poor in Poland is that of what food to give up first. Their life conditions were “unhygienic”, most families visited by researchers lived in constant fear of the future. To them, illness was simply a fact of life rather than an outcome of malnutrition or poor health care. The affluent, depending on their formative years and current professional standing were either cautious and distrustful of their affluence, or hedonistic and careless, especially if born in or after 1980 and working in advertising or media related industries. Yet, the scarcity of the employment situation means that even for the well-to-do, life evolves around work and its stresses and anxieties.⁶ Even though 73 per cent of Poles declared themselves to be “quite happy”,⁷ freedom to consume in Poland rarely translates into a relaxed or enjoyable lifestyle.

Another freedom, that of speech, was cemented by the first bill passed by the new Polish Parliament abolishing censorship in 1990. Together with the transition to a market economy, the abolition of censorship allowed for freedom of publishing, which in turn produced a new generation of popular Polish writers, many of them women, for instance Olga Tokarczuk, Magdalena Tulli or Manuela Gretkowska.⁸ Although generalisations cannot reflect the full scope of the literary world of post-1989 Poland, the new Polish fictional prose may be said to be characterised by attempts at emancipation from the tradition of religiosity and the critique of the emancipation offered by the newly-adopted capitalist system.⁹ At the same time, its attitude to Polish

⁶ Hanna Palska, *Bieda i dostatek: o nowych stylach życia w Polsce końca lat dziewięćdziesiątych* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IfiS PAN, 2002).

⁷ From NationMaster.com, *NationMaster.com*, 29 December 2004, (6 March 2005). <<http://www.nationmaster.com>>.

⁸ Interestingly, Andrzej Wajda attributes of the reasons of the poverty of Polish film scripts on the proliferation of women writers who write for the screen.

⁹ Kinga Dunin, *Czytaj!c Polskę; Literatura polska po roku 1989 wobec dylematów współczesności* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo WAB, 2004), esp. 213-294.

history, and literary history is ambivalent,¹⁰ a phenomenon also emphasised in a widely publicised popular media proclamation from Maria Janion on the death of the Romantic ethos, which is discussed more extensively in Chapters 2 and 4 of this dissertation, and which, for over 150 years, had been the driving force of Polish national identity and its longings for an independent national state.

All the circumstances described here so far lead to a relative post-transitional economic, political and cultural stability towards the end of the 1990s. While the unemployment and crime (especially robbery and bribery) rates remained high, that new stability of democratic and free market systems facilitated Poland's inclusion in NATO in 1999, and in the European Union (a limited membership) in 2004. These developments resulted in the increased popularity of questions of national identity and culture in political spheres, and also the increased visibility of nationalistic parties. At the same time the notions of "national culture" or "national heritage" lost the appeal they held for Poles in the old regime and earlier.¹¹ This loss was what could be credited to a cycle of heritage filmmaking analysed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

In 2005 Poland remains one of the most homogenous countries of Europe with 95 per cent of its almost forty-million population consisting of ethnic Poles and around 97 percent Catholics, statistics which have remained consistent for over half a century. Such homogeneity would seem to eliminate the forms of problematisation of collective self-identification found in more obviously multicultural or multiethnic societies. Yet, if we consider that in 1921 ethnic Poles constituted 70 per cent of the population of Poland,¹²

¹⁰ Przemysław Czapliński, *Źwiat podrobiony; Krytyka i literatura wobec nowej rzeczywistości* (Cracow: Universitas, 2003).

¹¹ Mateusz Werner, "Pułapka fałszywej wolności," *Kino* 352 (1996): 8-9.

¹² The remaining 30 percent comprised 14 percent of Ukrainians, 7.8 percent of Jews, and about 4 percent of Germans and 4 percent of Byelarussians. In M.B. Biskupski, *The History of Poland* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2000), 83.

and Roman Catholics comprised 65 per cent of the population,¹³ the contemporary absence of heterogeneity in Poland could easily constitute an interesting if not desirable complication in any discussion of Polish culture and social structure of the first 15 years after the end of the People's Republic. The following dissertation, however, focuses on the (relatively) homogeneous majority and this is where it positions Polish cinema of the period under discussion. In this context, the new class divisions and changes in social values constitute the emphasis, rather than the ways in which the new Poland positions its current and past minorities.

Without problematising the position of minorities, the most significant societal changes of the first fifteen years include the slow disintegration of the dominant standing of the intelligentsia in Poland,¹⁴ corresponding changes in the composition of social elites, and the redesigning of social value systems. In the reality of the new democratic and capitalist Poland, economic wealth rather than levels of education is what demarcates the new elite from the non-elite majority. In this situation, the old intelligentsia, which was the engine of the changes that facilitated post-communist transitions, split between those ready and willing to embrace capitalism and its ethos of success, and the "public service intelligentsia" (Polish "*budżetówka*"), whose financial advancement remained limited by public service budgets.¹⁵ Telling here is the difference in the new and old elites' attitude to democratising factors and their outcomes, as analysed in a 1993 survey.¹⁶ While the new elites adhered

¹³ Uniates, Orthodox and Jews formed each about 10 percent. In Biskupski, *The History of Poland*, 83.

¹⁴ Polish intelligentsia is credited as the social class that initiated and facilitated changes that led to the end of the communist system.

¹⁵ Jarosław Gowin, 3 March 2001, "Inteligencji  ywot po miertny," *Rzeczpospolita*. On-line access (18 June 2001) <<http://arch4.rp.pl:80/a/rz/2001/03/20010303/200103030107.html?pokaz+14255-10%2014267-7>>.

¹⁶ Jacek Wasilewski, "Elite circulation and consolidation of democracy in Poland," in *Postcommunist Elites and Democracy in Eastern Europe*, eds. John Higley, Jan Pakulski and W b dzimierz Weso bowski (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998) 172-173.

more closely to the values of the “economic liberalism model”, in which individuals are responsible for their well-being, the old elites emphasised some negative outcomes of the transition, including the social injustice of poverty. This emphasis was, in general, on a better alignment with the “socialism model” of a socio-political system of values.¹⁷ At the same time, general support for the ideals of democracy kept increasing. In 1992, 52 per cent considered democracy the superior form of government. A year later, it was 63 per cent, and in 1995 75 per cent. Here, it is significant that 37 percent of respondents, most of whom belong to the higher income brackets, listed freedom as the principal democratic value, and social justice, which came second in terms of its importance for democracy was nominated as the most important value by predominantly lower income groups.¹⁸ Although a definite conclusion based on these findings is premature, they do indicate that the concern with social justice is correlated more closely with lower economic and political power status.¹⁹ At the same time, the only two “traditionally” Polish or rather “mythically” Polish values that persevered in the transition from the communist to the capitalist system are said to be that of the importance of family and individualism,²⁰ which might translate into neo-liberal individual economic responsibility. The significance of these societal changes in the context of this dissertation lies in my positioning of certain filmmakers within them. Apart from a few people, most filmmakers described and analysed in the following chapters started their filmmaking careers before 1989. To remain successful, and especially commercially so, they too needed to readjust their value system to suit the new Polish reality, and the

¹⁷ Wasilewski, “Elite circulation,” 172-173.

¹⁸ Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, *Społeczna wizja ustroju demokratycznego* (Warsaw: Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej, 1995) 18.

¹⁹ Supporting this argument is also the results of a 2004 campaign to provide financial support for the victims of the children massacre in Beslan in Chechnya. Widely publicised in Polish media, it was groups from lower economic brackets who proved to be most charitable, while the charity boxes placed for the occasion in the building of the Polish Parliament [*Sejm*] collected only a nominal amount in the vicinity of 100 dollars.

²⁰ Małgorzata Lisowska-Magdziarz, “Wartości w polskiej reklamie telewizyjnej lat dziewięćdziesiątych,” *Zeszyty prasoznawcze* 3-4 (2001): 58-75.

new decision-making elites, which is an issue taken up in Chapter 2 of this work.

One last contextualising aspect of this dissertation is that of my fit in the structures and transitions described above. Although I did observe the first stages of these changes in Poland first hand, it was already done from the perspective of an outsider. When the agreement of the Round Table was signed to allow Mazowiecki to be the first non-communist Premier, I was living in London. It was in the Warsaw airport just before leaving for Australia that I heard of Tymosiński and Wałęsa progressing to the second stage of presidential elections. Furthermore, even my familiarity with the old system is limited to my childhood and teenage years, which were defined by my high-school educated working class parents, left-affiliated grandparents running a successful small private farm, and - after 1983 – a stepfather whose considerable entrepreneurial business drive during the communist period ran aground soon after 1989. Therefore, the ideological setting of my growing up is of mixed heritage. It is marked by both leftist and rightist longings, and the mixture of an entrepreneurial and a public service ethos.

The temporal setting of my childhood and teenage years places me in an unpredictable generational zone of the first cohort of Poles whose adult lives started in the Third Republic of Poland. The immediately preceding generation, the so called “rupture generation” born in the 1960s, understood better the nonsense and hopelessness of living in the People’s Republic, and were more imbued with the belief in public good, and a responsibility for public matters, which is what shaped their formative years in the Solidarity period of the 1980s.²¹ The generation that followed has different points of

²¹ Paweł Piewak in an interview with A. Franaszek, “W wieku Chrystusowym,” *Kontrapunkt* (supplement to *Tygodnik Powszechny*) 2-3 (2002): 1.

reference from that of the “rupture generation”. The first experiences of adulthood for us were in the atmosphere of political and economic instability and uncertainty of the avalanching transformations. Unlike the “rupture generation”, people born in the early 1970s are said to be particularly un-rebellious, which is sometimes attributed to our great hopes for normality.²² Given that “normality” is exactly what we had not been exposed to, a more plausible explanation for my generation’s relative quietude is that rebellion in a time of momentous political, social and cultural changes is futile, if indeed possible at all. The communist regime was gone, the new one was shaky and undefined, as were the potential targets for a rebellion. While generational divisions themselves are fluid and unstable, in the context of significant and rapid systemic change the validity of these divisions is easier to demarcate than in other cases. This point is evident in some films by Polish filmmakers born in the late 1960s, and analysed in Chapter 6 of this dissertation.²³ Their films are less concerned with the Polish past, be it imagined or one still fresh in the memory of those alive. They relate to their current internationalised and commercialised context rather than attempting to search for various kinds of national continuities. At the same time, and for that reason, they seem to be unable to escape that past, which defines their current condition.

As a closing remark for this preamble, it has to be said that searching for any patterns to human activity, including filmic activity, is an illusive task punctuated by dead ends and mirages that disintegrate when touched by one piece of evidence that does not confirm them. This dissertation does not claim to present a theory of all cultural or filmic activity in Poland between 1989 and 2004, but it does point to patterns whose visibility makes them less

²² Piotr Szczepański in an interview by Magda Ĺebicka, “Pokolenia nie ma,” *Kino* 7-8 (2004): 20.

²³ It will be interesting to see whether that “generation” of filmmakers will produce a different body of work to the previous ones. Also, compare with Peter Hanson’s book on *The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC and London: MacFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002).

susceptible than others to paradigmatic instabilities. It is clear that the real import of the last stages of the period under analysis in this dissertation will only be unveiled by future developments and consequences. At the time of writing this preamble (early 2005) Poland's position within Europe and its Union is still newly found and awaiting further redesign. Polish military and economic alliances might need re-evaluation once Poland becomes a full member of the Union, and through that, its "return" to Europe would be complete. Only then, would the period of post-communist change reach its destination.