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Image of Upper Social Classes in the Polish Feature Film in 1947–1989

*Obraz wyższych warstw społecznych w polskim filmie fabularnym
w latach 1947–1989*

ABSTRACT

The article presents the Image of Upper Social Classes in the Polish Feature Film in the years 1947–1989. It analyzes several dozen films as a kind of historical sources and allows to show the influence of politics on mass culture. Upper social classes of the old Poland were sentenced to destruction in the Polish People's Republic. In the period of socialist realism they were presented as the main enemy of the people, a symbol of reaction and the source of evil. But since the mid-fifties they were looked at with a kind of sentiment, although emphasizing the fact that they belonged to a closed chapter of history. The approach to these privileged classes, and what follows, their image in art, including film, was changing together with the political changes in Poland. It can be clearly seen in the films produced before 1989. The way of presenting nobles or bourgeoisie coincided with the dynamics of transformations in Poland of that times.

Key words: Polish People Republic, film, upper class, propaganda

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Upper social classes of the old Poland, that is, of the times of the First Polish Republic, of the times of partitions, and of the interwar period, were not treated particularly well by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic. There were periods when they were presented as the main enemy of the people, as a symbol of reaction and the source of evil, but at times they were looked at with a kind of sentiment, although the emphasis was put on the fact that they belonged to a closed chapter of history. The approach to these privileged classes, and what follows, their image in art, including film, was changing together with the political changes in Poland, which can be clearly seen in the films produced before 1989. The way of presenting nobles or bourgeoisie coincided with the dynamics of transformations in Poland of that times.

We should emphasize here right away that when aiming at explanation of the ways in which these groups were showed in the film of the Polish People's Republic, we have to take into consideration the categories occurring in various historical periods, characterized, in addition, by internal differentiation. We also have to take into account those who did not live in manor houses and palaces, but preserved their old identity to a lesser or bigger extent. There are such figures in the films which interest me. Also, there are those who are undoubtedly representatives of the old elites living in the People's Republic, but the viewer was not notified clearly whether their ancestors were some time ago walking in an Old Polish split-sleeve overcoat and with a saber on the side or if they were managing a factory from a luxurious study. Anyway, generally, while showing on the screen such people, who undoubtedly belonged to said social groups, the filmmakers do not explain the sociological complexity related to it. It may seem that such notions as nobility, landed gentry, aristocracy, are treated synonymously. For now, their ignorance in this regard has to be accepted with all that it entails.

Actually, every article devoted to the cinema of the Polish People's Republic should be started with an emphasis put on the fact that art of that period was not autonomous, but subordinated to the goals of the governing party. This was the situation which lasted from the beginning of that cinema, where socialist realism was in force. As Michał Głowiński writes in his widely acknowledged work titled *Rytuał i demagogia. Trzyście szkiców o sztuce zdegradowanej*¹, the aim of art which accepted socrealism as the creative method, was not to reflect reality, but to present it in accordance with the assumptions of the ruling party. In other words,

¹ M. Głowiński, *Rytuał i demagogia. Trzyście szkiców o sztuce zdegradowanej*, Warszawa 1992.

the world presented in film could have nothing in common with what could have been seen with one's own eyes, if only was in accordance with what was said by party's ideologists.

This also concerned history, which underwent a reinterpretation. Some elements were selected, other were rejected, and other were reconceptualized². It seems that we can even talk about a new exegesis of history aimed at justification of the creation of the People's Republic as a kind of coronation of history. At the same time, the manipulations performed by communist ideologists in the history of Poland often resemble the explanations found in religious writings³. Similarly as in the case of religions, we deal here with myths, that is, with events concerning the past (often serving to justify the existing status quo), and with dogmas. The later can be divided into these which are irrefutable and those which are, so called, auxiliary and peripheral, and the interpretation of which can undergo changes⁴.

Of course, this new vision of the past had to find its reflection in art. An irrefutable dogmas were the alliance with the Soviet Union which was a source of good, and the conflict with the capitalist world. Next to them, there were auxiliary dogmas, among them, the approach to the previous elites. Initially they were harshly criticized, with time, however, it changed and they could have counted on some understanding. But of course, they could have never turned out better than the people's authorities.

Social realism ended as a creative method binding all the artists in the middle of the 1950s. This, however, did not mean the encouragement of a full creative freedom and until the end of the People's Republic the authorities were determining, controlling and influencing what and how should be showed, and what should not.

Cinematography was a sphere of great interest of the authorities from its very beginning. They were aware of the capabilities of film in propaganda, as it was a mass art reaching broad groups of audiences. The creators of the Polish postwar cinematography were first of all the people related before the war to the leftist START – Association of Friends of Artistic Film [Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Filmu Artystycznego], which gathered people interested in film art having leftist, or even communist, beliefs. The first chair of the State Enterprise 'Polish Film' [Przedsiębiorstwo

² See: R. Stobiecki, *Historiografia PRL. Ani dobra, ani mądra, ani piękna... ale skomplikowana*, Warszawa 2007.

³ M. Kula, *Religiopodobny komunizm*, Kraków 2003.

⁴ I write more on this topic in the article *Powiemy wam jak było. Historia w kinie PRL*, in: *Historie alternatywne i kontrfaktyczne. Wizje – narracje – metodologia*, eds. E. Solska, P. Witek, M. Woźniak, Lublin 2017, pp. 95–112.

Państwowe Film Polski] was Aleksander Ford, a prewar member of the Communist Party of Poland⁵. It was very quickly clear that filmmakers could not have counted on any creative freedom. Instead, their art should serve the party and realize its goals.

Everything found its expression in the image of the world presented in film. We should underline right away that the position of the old elites was not particularly emphasized. They mainly appear in historic films and are always presented in a definitely negative way – as ‘a refuge of reaction’, a group with backwards and anti-national beliefs, not seeing any good in the Polish people. We see this in the films devoted to the Polish composers: Stanisław Miniuszko (*The Warsaw Premiere* [*Warszawska premiera*], directed by J. Rybkowski, 1950) and Fryderyk Chopin (*Youth of Chopin* [*Młodość Chopina*], directed by A. Ford, 1952). The main characters are of course positive: they find inspiration in folk music, they have friendly feelings towards the Polish people, they also express democratic views. Completely different is the Polish aristocracy, great landed gentry, which not only disdains simple people, but also stands as an obstacle of any democratization processes. In *The Warsaw Premiere*, representatives of gentry will do anything to block the premiere of *Halka*, making comments that the exquisite musical patterns can only come from the West. Italian opera is here an ideal. Thus, what is Polish, folk, does not have – according to them – any value. Similarly, in *Youth of Chopin* – circles focused around prince Adam Czartoryski are the proponents of feudal relations and the complete dependence of the Polish peasant on his master. In both images, the great gentry is confronted with the ‘progressive’ artists – Moniuszko and Chopin – and ‘progressive’ intelligentsia which wants to liberate the people.

Equally negatively gentry was portrayed in the film *Podhale in Fire* [*Podhale w ogniu*] (by J. Batory and H. Hechtkopf, 1955/6) with the main character of Aleksander Kostka Napierski, and the plot set in 1651. Omitting the question of historical inconsistencies, we should pay attention to the particularly negative presentation of the gentry of these times as evil, cruel and stupid. Peasants are rebelling against them under leadership of Napierski. *Podhale in Fire* had its premiere in January 1956, and in the following year *Charcoal sketches* [*Szkice węglem*] (by A. Bohdziewicz) based on Henryk Sienkiewicz’s short story had its one. The date of the premiere could suggest that we would here have a film created already in the spirit of the thaw. Despite that, *Charcoal sketches* is realized completely within the framework of the poetics of social realism. Sienkiewicz’s short story

⁵ D. Skotarczak, *Historia wizualna*, Poznań 2012, pp. 109–127.

was remade to gain proper political significance. The adversaries in the movie are – besides communal writer Żółzikiewicz – clergy and Polish landed gentry, characterized by extreme selfishness.

In turn, *Nikodem Dyzma* (by J. Rybkowski, 1956) shows a negative image of the elites from the interwar period. Even though it is admitted that they played a very important role at that time, simultaneously however, the author points out their stupidity, opportunism, limited intellectual abilities and the moral collapse. Both this film as well as its predecessor – *House of Cards [Domek z kart]* (by S. Wohl, 1954) – do not leave any doubts that the fall of Poland in 1939 was to a great extent a fault of the upper classes of society of that time.

The films with contemporary plots feature characters with a background in those classes less frequently. Perhaps, negative characters in some of the productions from these years do have this kind of background, however, it is not stated clearly. However, the prewar elites, including gentry, belonged to a fixed set of black characters of so-called realist cinema. But, it is frequent that the precise social designation of particular figures is lacking. Declassed gentry appears for sure in *Devil's Gully [Czarci Żleb]* (by T. Kański and A. Vergano, 1950), one of not so many films from the era which attracted interest of audiences. It was thanks to the main character Jasiak Gazdoń (Tadeusz Schmidt), a young mountaineer serving in Border Protection Army [Wojsko Ochrony Pogranicza], as well as to an engaging sensational action. Ideological significance is unequivocal. The soldiers of WOP are tracking a gang of smugglers – bad, cruel and brutal people. Moreover, the smugglers try to sneak a fortune of a noble family out of Poland. In *Devil's Gully*, gentry, which tries to save remains of their old property, is presented as thieves and extremely unpleasant people.

A few more films feature representatives of the prewar elite (e.g. *Baltazar's Feast [Uczta Baltazara]* by J. Zarzycki, 1954, *Five from Barska Street [Piątka z ulicy Barskiej]* by A. Ford, 1954), but it is hard to determine their class belonging.

The middle of the 1950s brought 'the thaw', and the year of 1956 was recorded in history as a turning point. Political changes influenced art significantly: so-called realism as the obligatory creative method ended. The changes in cinematography became visible: so-called Polish film school and back series developed. Documentaries and feature films of the later were very critical towards the reality. They were showing poverty, hooliganism, alcoholism. Within the framework of the Polish film school, in turn, its leading authors (Andrzej Wajda and Andrzej Munk) undertook the question of coming to terms with the past. And exactly in their films we can see the elites of yesterday (*Eroica* A. Munk, 1958; *Ashes and Diamonds*

[*Popiół i diament*] and *Lotna*, both by A. Wajda, 1958, 1959). Let us also state immediately that they turn out negatively. We might have an impression that the way of their portrayal changed, in relation to the previous period, a little if at all.

The Polish film school is a specific trend in the history of Polish cinema. It brought a worldwide publicity to the Polish cinematography (*Kanał* by Andrzej Wajda, 1958, received a Silver Palm at Cannes Film Festival) and to Polish directors (Andrzej Wajda began his world career exactly at that time), and the films created within its framework became a subject of numerous intellectual discussions. The actors playing for Wajda or Munk become stars of native cinematography (Zbigniew Cybulski, Bogumił Kobiela). However, the assessment of this trend (despite of its undoubted artistic values) is not unequivocal to this day. Even though, we can hear about the Home Army, Warsaw insurgents, soldiers of the September campaign, all those people are presented as the defeated. And it is not only about a military defeat. It is history that does not give them credit, and points out that the officers of the Second Republic, Home Army soldiers, are doomed to failure as a structure, as people who had made bad decisions and taken wrong side. Even if they are brave and selfless, they end up at the so called dustbin of history nevertheless (Maciek from *Ashes and Diamonds* dies on a dustbin – it is a greatly symbolic scene). At the same time they are often laughable, unnecessarily heroic, they cherish old fashion patterns of behavior (officer's ethos), but also fight with the new which inevitably is coming from the East with the new people's authorities presented in the films very clearly – of course – positively. And here we arrive at a particularly interesting question as those doomed for failure and standing on the wrong side are often representatives of the prewar gentry (*Eroica; Ashes and Diamonds; Lotna*). Maria Dąbrowska after seeing *Ashes and Diamonds* wrote: 'Like the novel, the film is falsified – again the same patterns: ex-counts, ex-gentry as the only enemies of the situation which occurred in 1945. [...] Perhaps the film of Wajda showed the maximum of the truth possible to be showed nowadays'⁶.

It seems very interesting that the image of gentry in film after 1956 actually did not change. They still played the role that they were assigned within the sphere of the party's propaganda right after the war. As such, they are 'a refuge of reaction', they fight the new order, they do not

⁶ 'Jak powieść, film jest zafalszowany – znowu te same schematy: eks-hrabiowie, eks-ziemiaństwo jako jedyni wrogowie sytuacji, jaka się w 1945 r. wytworzyła. [...] Być może, że film Wajdy pokazał maksimum prawdy możliwej do pokazania w dzisiejszej sytuacji'. M. Dąbrowska, *Dzienniki powojenne 1955–1959*, vol. 3, Warszawa 1997, p. 335.

accept the changes which take place, they disdain simple people and lead a dissipated lifestyle and, of course, are doomed to failure. Despite the changes, rehabilitation of the prewar elites or – at least – a factual assessment of them, did not come yet.

A good example are here two films based on Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz's novels: *Nikodem Dyzma* (by J. Rybkowski, 1956) and *The Diary of Ms. Hanka* [*Pamiętnik pani Hanki*] (by S. Lenartowicz, 1963). Already reaching for the works of this writer may be considered an example of the changes taking place, as Dołęga-Mostowicz was on the index during Stalinism and his books were destined for grinding⁷. It is not surprising then that when in October 1956 *Nikodem Dyzma* was showed on the screens, it met with an enthusiasm of the audience, for whom the times of the Second Republic were a subject of memories and longing. However, both this film as well as the later one, *The Diary...*, constituted a crushing criticism of the prewar elites. They are stupid, incompetent, lead dissolute lifestyle. In addition to that, corruption and favoritism are spreading among the representatives of authorities. The author of the books, which were the base for the scenarios, himself also did not spare criticism toward his contemporaries, which made filming of his novels generally possible. However, the closing scene of *The Diary...* draws our attention to a particular detail. The main character died at the very beginning of the war and her death became a symbol of the death of the entire useless – according to the filmmakers – social class. Dołęga-Mostowicz himself could not have written something like this as he had died in September 1939, killed by the Red Army. This however was not underlined.

A bit more sympathy is given to the gentry in *Farewells* [*Pożegnania*] (by W. Has, 1958), but this film is different from those from the Polish film school. It has a cameral atmosphere, tells a story about love broken by the war, not possible to rekindle. However, also here the gentry, together with the husband of the main character, Mirek (Gustaw Holoubek), turns out to be not worth much. The count escapes, as he does not want to live in Poland liberated by the Red Army. Both he as well as his family are worth little, grotesque, kind of from another epoch, unfit. But thanks to the direction of Wojciech Has, the world which is descending to the past, may arouse a bit of compassion, maybe nostalgia, in the viewer.

Upper classes are, in turn, presented positively in films for children and youth, the plot of which takes us back to the 19th century (such as in the case of *The Hour of a Bright Red Rose* [*Godzina pąsowej róży*], 1963,

⁷ K. Kondak, *Papierowa rewolucja. Oficjalny obieg książek w Polsce w latach 1948–1955*, Warszawa 1999.

by H. Bielińska) or to the times of Władysław IV (i.e. *The Young Lady From the Window* [*Panienka z okienka*], 1964, by M. Kaniewska). However, both screenings of the known novels (respectively, of Maria Krüger and Deotyima) are characterized by the poetics typical for stories intended for young viewers, and the spirit of the epoch serves as an additional attraction, playing the role of a justification for adventures lived by the main characters. On the other hand, however, such films undoubtedly had to paint a positive image of the past times for the young viewer.

But the representatives of the prewar elites, who emigrated to Great Britain and have any connection to the Polish government-in-exile, cannot count on the understanding of viewers. In the comedy *Wellies of Happiness* [*Kalosze szczęścia*] (by A. Bohdziewicz, 1958), they are presented as petty, conflicted, unable to create anything constructive, lost in futile discussions. They constitute a natural contrast to what is going on in Poland. One cannot find neither happiness nor social justice when outside of his or her country. The thesis is illustrated by the tragic fate of the character who decides to stay in emigration and dies under the wheel of the car of one of the members of London Government. This is the destiny that awaits those who trusted London. Why the Polish government functions in London? Why do Polish emigrants not return to their motherland? Said questions, however, remain unexplained.

The attitude toward the old elites – and, what follows – their image in film have so far turned out a fixed element of the communist propaganda. And while watching films from the second half of the 1950s we may see how limited was, in fact, the thaw in the culture. On the one hand, it is difficult not to appreciate its significance – after all, the period of terror ended – on the other hand, its principles were impossible to undermine. A bipolar division of the world was still in place with the forces of the good and progress (the socialist countries with the Soviet Union at the forefront) and the forces of the evil and stagnation (the capitalist countries with the United States at the forefront). Upper classes belonged to the latter, connected with the feudal, and later capitalist system. In this situation the elites of the Second Republic of Poland – as well as the entire Second Republic – could not count on significant ‘mitigation of punishment’, at least not immediately. Rehabilitation of this group would have meant rehabilitation of the prewar Poland, and at that it was too early for such transformation. Nevertheless, we can slowly observe some shift in the focus.

In 1957, *The Revenge* [*Zemsta*] (by A. Bohdziewicz), based on a known play of Aleksander Fredro, was presented on the big screen. It is not a particularly successful enterprise with regard to artistry, but it shows

the Polish nobility in a bit more positive light. That means, cordially, but also with a sense of humor. The protagonists are entertaining, the conflict between Cześnik and Rejent – light. In *The Revenge*, the flaws of the old inhabitants of manor houses are ridiculed, and they are painted as perhaps nice people, but not too serious and little brainy. And the action took place one hundred years before the premiere of the film, so it does not concern the Second Republic but a time so remote that it is possible for the creators to preserve a certain distance to it.

The Revenge, pointing out flaws of the gentry with a pinch of salt and kindness, remains in 1957 a singular occurrence. Nevertheless, the film indicates a direction in which the authorities' approach to this class will evolve in the next decade. It is a particularly interesting moment, as the former landlord does not necessarily need to be a class enemy who comes after the representatives of the authorities from the people, represses the people, smuggles items of value to the West while making pacts with crime groups. In the sixties, the representative of the gentry is more and more often cast in the comedy role, as if with the passing of time the authorities decided that the prewar elites do not constitute a significant threat for the People's Republic anymore, and that there is no reason for scaremongering. Or, perhaps, it was decided that laughter will be the most effective weapon? Nevertheless, gentry, as well as former gentry, are showed without implacability and even with a dose of curiosity.

Thereby, in the comedy *One Thousand Thalers* [*Tysiąc talarów*] (by S. Wohl, 1960) some of the contemporary descendants of the gentry are in fact greedy and not so honest, but the young generation, growing up in the Polish People's Republic, is friendly and devoid of the bigotry of their ancestors (Barbara Kwiatkowska i Bronisław Pawlik). In the comedy crime story *Cryptonym Nektar* [*Kryptonim Nektar*], in turn, Jarema Stępowski plays a parceled-out count Dymek who does not avoid minor swindles but is neither dangerous nor evil overall, rather ridiculous. His aunt, in turn, runs a newsstand 'Ruch'. The film constitutes a contribution to the image of the fate of gentry in the postwar Poland. Usually, they were actually very well-educated people, speaking foreign languages, and enculturated. And in the People's Republic they faced total degradation and life at the margins of the society, perchance recalling their past splendor. This is not completely true. Although the gentry lost properties and livelihood, a part of them was condemned to suffering, another part managed to survive the worst in the new reality. This happened mostly thanks to old connections and self-help of their circle, and, obviously, to their intellectual skills. This last thing allowed some of them to undertake jobs in museums, editorial offices, libraries. Often on not very prominent and low paid positions, but

in any case fairly worthy of their effort. However, there were people who could not count even on this⁸.

The 1960s, in turn, brought slow but visible warming of the image of gentry. We witness the beginning of talking about Polish nobility and noble tradition, and even of showing certain attachment to it. This tendency is more and more clearly seen with time⁹. A greatly interesting example of this phenomenon in film is *Marriage of Convenience* [*Małżeństwo z rozsądku*] (by S. Bareja, 1967). In this image three worlds converge: that of old aristocracy (Edzio and the countess – his aunt), of private operators (Burczyk family) and of young intelligentsia and artists (Burczyk's daughter, Andrzej). All these worlds intertwine and – what is more – come into businesses with each other. Edzio (Bohdan Łazuka) – although he says that he was not created to work, which runs in his blood, he will probably undertake studies in the field of the history of art – which he previously resigned from – and in the future he will land a decent job by means of his aunt's connections¹⁰. The aunt's situation is not bad either – she is selling the small family manor house for a lot of money, which will ensure her affluent existence. In *Marriage of Convenience* we see ex-counts and ex-gentry as a 'descending class', seen as probably involved in shady political enterprises, but at the same time prospering quite well in the new reality, maintaining old connections, studying attractive university courses. And in future, perhaps, will regain their old significance?

Obviously, Edzio and his aunt are, like count Dymek in *Cryptonym Nektar*, funny. There was no other way of talking about aristocracy, gentry and generally about the elites of the Second Republic. They did not have to be dangerous any more, but they had to be entertaining. It is also visible that laziness, the tendency to pursue an easy lifestyle, attempts to preserve the old splendor, manifested as mannerism in behavior, are showed as the main features of people belonging to this group. In this case, criticism follows a certain pattern: again, in old (prewar) Poland they were lazy, and the people were doing everything for them. And now the people govern in the People's Republic.

⁸ An example here may be a brother of a known writer, Maria Dąbrowska, Boguś Szumski – a colonel in the Polish Army in the West, hardly making ends meet as a bank clerk after his return to the country: M. Dąbrowska, *op. cit.*; another diarist writes about vegetation in poverty at his relative's place: Z. Mycielski, *Dziennik 1960–1969*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 321–322.

⁹ M. Krzemińska, *Szlachta. Nie tylko w muzeum*, in: *Nim będzie zapomniana – Szkice o kulturze PRL-u*, ed. S. Bednarek, Wrocław 1997, pp. 112–122.

¹⁰ L. Hass, *Pokolenia inteligencji polskiej 1918–1997*, Łowicz 1997, p. 43.

One more thing should be pointed out: if the representatives of the prewar aristocracy are not declassed, do not live from petty swindles as count Dymek does, they usually take up so called 'freelance jobs'. Like Edzio, who completes his art history degree and his aunt's connections ensure him the future, or like doctor Tomasz (Bogumił Kobiela) in *Man from M-3* [*Człowiek z M-3*] (by L. Jeannot, 1969), whose 'better' background is mentioned between the lines. Tomasz works in a hospital in the capital, lives in a big apartment with his mother, plays tennis, is often present 'in the salons'. The last thing is possible to a large extent due to the old (prewar) connections of his mother. All these films suggest that the old systems of connections have not been liquidated, and that people belonging to the prewar elites, after losing properties and positions (with an exception of the aunt – countess selling the manor house), are building their new position, even if only thanks to the received education. They can count on the help of old acquaintances.

With time, in the 1960s we can see that the approach to the old upper classes in the time of 'small stabilization' was indeed getting warmer. There was no a word about the rehabilitation of the Second Republic, but, anyway, people from that era did not have necessarily to be class enemies. The change of the approach to the old gentry is even better seen in historical films based on classic position of the Polish literature. Even though that nobility from the 17th or 19th century consisted of the ancestors of the Polish landed gentry from the interwar period. The leading example here is the screening of *Colonel Wołodyjowski* [*Pan Wołodyjowski*] (by J. Hoffman, 1969) based on Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel where the main protagonists are positive, and the whole work is a kind of approbation of the Poland of noblemen.

Slightly different is the situation in the case of films the action of which takes place in the 19th century: *Ashes* [*Popioły*] based on Stefan Żeromski's novel (by A. Wajda, 1965) and *The Doll* [*Lalka*] based on Bolesław Prus' novel (by W. Hass, 1968). Generally, we can see a certain division in both of these films: the representatives of middle and petty nobility are usually much more positive characters than the representatives of aristocracy. The intelligentsia is definitely presented in a positive light. So, what we have here is a division within the circles of elites.

To end this part of our considerations, it is worth mentioning the career path of Beata Tyszkiewicz, actress who became one of the major stars of the cinema of the People's Republic. She played in *Ashes* (as princess Elżbieta), in *Marysia and Napoleon* (by L. Buczkowski, 1966, as Ms. Walewska – the love of the emperor Napoleon and as Marysia – a student), in *The Doll* (as Izabela Łęcka). She played the roles of aristocrats in every movie

she starred. Moreover, her aristocratic background was discussed quite commonly. Rumor had it that she came from 'those Tyszkiewiczzes'. As we can see then, the sympathy toward the old elites and fascination with the world of aristocracy was not completely erased from the socialist society. What is even more important, this did not harm Tyszkiewicz in any way. To the contrary, she was allowed to exploit her popularity by casting her continuously in the roles of aristocrats as she supposedly was made for it. What over a dozen years earlier would have probably turned out to be a stigma ending a career – here was boosting it. And perhaps this fact shows in the best way the change of the attitude toward the old gentry in the Polish People's Republic¹¹.

The year of 1970 brought about another change in the politics towards aristocracy: previous 1st secretary of the Communist Party Władysław Gomułka was dismissed from his position which was taken by Edward Gierek. The Polish People's Republic entered an era called ironically by some historians *la bella époque*¹². The cinema changed as well. And the representatives of the social groups which are interesting to us became protagonists of the new films. On the one hand, screenings of great Polish literature were continued, but on the other hand, we should note the appearance of new ideas and solutions. Among the screenings were: *The Peasants* [*Chłopi*] based on Władysław Reymont's work with the same name (by J. Rybkowski, 1973); *The Wedding* [*Wesele*] (by A. Wajda, 1973) based on Stanisław Wyspiański's play; *Nights and Days* [*Noce i dnie*] based on Maria Dąbrowska's novel (by J. Antczak, 1975); *Boundary* [*Granica*] based on Zofia Nałkowska's novella (by J. Rybkowski, 1978); *The Outpost* [*Placówka*] based on B. Prus' novel (by Z. Skonieczny, 1979); *The Maids of Wilko* [*Panny z Wilka*] based on Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's short story (by A. Wajda, 1979). *The Palace* [*Pałac*] based on Wiesław Myśliwski's short story (by T. Junak, 1980), a screening of a contemporary novel written as a part of so called 'peasant trend' in the Polish literature. Another drama by Myśliwski, *Turnkey* [*Klucznik*] was screened by W. Marczewski was screened a year earlier, in 1979. Firstly, it was planned to be a full-length film, but finally was showed, albeit with some delay, in the television.

In *Peasants*, landed gentry appears marginally, however, it is much more present in *The Wedding* or *The Outpost*. Wyspiański in his drama, shows that all the classes of the Polish society are unable to undertake a fight with the partitioner, as they are stuck in stagnation. Wajda's film shifts the weight

¹¹ J. Tabęcki, *Beata Tyszkiewicz: Wierność sobie i widowni*, 'Iluzjon. Kwartalnik filmowy' 1989, 1 (33), pp. 3–6.

¹² A. Paczkowski, *Pół wieku dziejów Polski 1939–1989*, Warszawa 1998, p. 393.

in favor of the peasants as this class is presented with a dose of sympathy. In *The Outpost*, in turn, the landlord is completely indifferent toward the national matters. He is, anyway, parceled out and the responsibility for preserving the national traditions alive is transferred to the peasant family of Ślimak. There is a scene in the film, which is absent in the book – Ślimak (Franciszek Pieczka), having arrived at the palace, finds it empty, while a Jewish tradesman buying stuff from the manor house throws a painting depicting prince Józef Poniatowski into the peasant's cart. Through such symbols both of the films suggest that landed gentry ceased to be the leading class in the nation, and this role was taken over by the peasants. The gentry was declassed, they succumbed to cosmopolitanism or became impotent. Also in *Janosik* (by J. Passendorfer, 1974) the great lords do not look well. It is the peasants that are the morally healthy class.

In *The Border*, in turn, where the plot takes place in the interwar period, the gentry is ready to tolerate hypocrisy and as such does not have any qualifications to perform any leadership functions in the society. We find a similar situation in *The Affair of Teresa Hennert* [*Romans Teresy Hennert*] (by I. Gogolewski, 1978) filmed also based on Zofia Nałkowska's novel. The elites of the prewar Poland play, have affairs, embezzle national money and do not give an impression of being ready to take serious responsibility for their own country.

The aforementioned films present the gentry in not so good light – it is worth noting that at times by interpreting literary prototypes in an intended, unfavorable way. We can see then that the tradition of unfavorable depiction of the old elites in film was maintained also in the 1970s. However, it should be emphasized that these films are artistically at a high level (or are even outstanding), and the criticism they include is usually indirect and is intended to be rather an effect of the viewer's reflection. It also becomes a part of the conceptions of general criticism of nobility which ascribed to this group all the responsibility for the collapse of Poland¹³.

But apart from such rather not very positive portrayals of the gentry, there also appeared films, which carried completely different significance. I think here primarily about *Night and Days*, an outstanding film (both the big screen version as well as the TV series) directed by Jerzy Antczak. The film's plot starts after the January Uprising and ends with the outbreak of the First World War. The main characters: Barbara (Jadwiga Barańska) and Bogumił (Jerzy Bińczycki) Niechcics are people committed to national traditions (Bogumił fought in the uprising), they work hard taking care of

¹³ See: R. Stobiecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 91–94, 132.

land property entrusted to them, and Bogumił's attachment to the land, sense of responsibility (also for the peasants) make him an almost perfect protagonist. Such depiction of the Polish nobility, who manages their properties fairly, constituted a complete novelty in the postwar cinema. It is also a certain proof for 'a relaxation of the antipathy' directed at the gentry and the old elites in general. But, perhaps, there is another way of reading the film version of *Nights and Days*. Jadwiga Łużyńska-Doroba writes that Bogumił, as 'the good manager' was associated with the figure of Edward Gierek who was very willing to see himself in this role.

The manor house from the interwar period is an object of nostalgia and memories in the film *The Maids of Wilko*. Although the mature protagonist who visits it after many years, does not find there the world of his young years, he still leaves it feeling encouraged. The noble culture is showed here with some nostalgia induced by the awareness of its decline.

Hubal (1973), and precisely one episode from the film of Bohdan Poręba, is also worth paying attention, as the gentry was there also looked at in a slightly different way. I think here about the scene where the unit of major Henryk Dobrzański arrives to a manor house for horses. An elderly host sees giving up the animals as his duty, he acts as his parents did when the soldiers of the January Uprising came. This way, the truth about the military effort of the gentry during the partitions is expressed by the author.

Turnkey and *The Palace* – both based on Myśliwski's works, require, in turn, special attention. They both deserve a unique place in our cinema and constitute a new proposal for an approach to the gentry. In *Turnkey* we see a complicated game taking place between the lord (Tadeusz Łomnicki) and his turnkey (Wirgiliusz Gryń). The latter hides from the ill lord the fact that he does not rule here anymore – it is 1945 – and gives him fictional reports. The lord, in turn, probably knows that everything has changed but talks with his servant as if everything was as before. When finally the lord feels the approaching death, he asks the turnkey to dress the Old Polish split-sleeve overcoat and to attach a karabela. This way the descending class designates its successor – the people. It is the people who, ennobled in such unusual way, are supposed to take over the traditions, duties, but also the role which for centuries was played by the nobility. On the other hand, however, the people (the turnkey) are fascinated by lordhood and shows a great attachment to it, and almost cannot free itself from the influence of its actually previous master.

Equally unusual is *The Palace*. Here we deal with a complete change of roles. A shepherd Jakub (Janusz Michałowski) takes over the role of the lord; he identifies with it completely. The plot of the film takes place in the moment of a historical turning point (after the revolution in Russia,

or rather in Poland after 1945?). Previous lords escape, peasants take their place. However, it turns out that being a lord does not only mean indulging in sensual pleasures, it also involves participating in a very sophisticated culture which is not easy to learn. It also means taking responsibility for the mistakes made.

Both *Turnkey* as well as *The Palace* show that relationships between the gentry and the peasants were very strong, although complex, and the manor house had a strong influence over its servants. But they also present something else – after the liquidation of the gentry, which was the culture-building class, remains a gap. It seemed that after the role of gentry ceased to exist (the parceled out gentry was being relocated), the gap was quickly forgotten. It turns out that the people's authorities miscalculated: the memory about the old lords remains preserved, and the noble culture turns out to be an extremely interesting proposal, for the people even more interesting than anything else. Noble culture of the gentry still fascinates and becomes the general national culture. Of course, such a conclusion coming from the films might not have been enjoyed by the current authorities. They did not allow the mass distribution of *Turnkey*, we may guess that they did not appreciate the interpretation of the change in the political system after the war which was presented there nor the suggestion about the noble culture as appropriated by the people¹⁴.

But even more unusual was the film *Let's Love Each Other* [*Kochajmy się*] (by K Wojciechowski, 1974). It can be even considered a kind of oddity. In a contemporary village a conflict takes place between the director of a State Agricultural Farm and individual farmers. The farmers graze their cows on state meadows. The director does not agree to this and imposes fines on them. In fact this conflict reminds of the conflict of easements which occurred in the Russian partition after enfranchisement. The thing is that in the place of the grange we have SAF, and in the place of the lord – its director. This does not mean, however, that one lord replaced the other one. Polishness, the carrier of which was previously the gentry, now is a good belonging also to the people. We should not be surprised then that contemporary peasants behave in various situation as the previous Poles. The title of the film itself is also the title of the last book of *Pan Tadeusz*. It closes actually similarly to the epos of Adam Mickiewicz with a great feast, when all the conflicted parts are reconciled.

Another situation we have in *Family Life* [*Życie rodzinne*] (by K. Zanussi, 1971), the plot of which is situated in the contemporary times. The father

¹⁴ G. Pełczyński, *Dziesiąta muza w stroju ludowym. O wizerunkach kultury chłopskiej w kinie PRL*, Poznań 2003, p. 127.

of the main character, of a young engineer Wit, was a rich factory owner before the war, now is only the owner of a small workshop. The son, educated in another reality, cannot find a common language with his father.

To end this part of our reflections we should necessarily mention the films created within the retro trend. I have here in mind, first of all, *The Leper* [*Trędowata*] (by J. Hoffman, 1976) and *The Quack* (by J. Hoffman, premiere in April 1982, the preparations for the film were started before the introduction of martial law which constitutes a boundary date). Both were created based on bestsellers of the prewar popular literature: based on a well-known novel of Helena Mniszkówna and an equally popular book of Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz. Both films have the same director, both also belong to the entertainment cinema. Their appearance on the screens, especially the appearance of the earlier *The Leper* is very symptomatic. It can be interpreted in various ways.

Helena Mniszkówna was a pariah in the People's Republic. Her work was considered almost a synonym of the prewar kitsch and therefore prohibited from being published. The situation began to change in the 1970s when her famous romance was published and the film *The Leper* became a blockbuster and was probably a sign of a nostalgia for simple entertainment cinema, melodrama, but also of a kind of nostalgia for the past times, for the old culture, for the noble manor house, in one word: for the past¹⁵. Such nostalgia emerged in the 1970s not only in Poland, it became common in the West. And it came to us, although it took a specific form. However, both here and there people were longing for a similar historical period – for the times from before the Second World War which were still remembered by the old people, but which were unknown to the young. They longed for the mythical, idealized interwar period. Not accidentally the Western hit lists include old records of the Glenn Miller orchestra, and the blockbusters include films telling nostalgic stories about those times (a flagship example are here *The Great Gatsby*, by J. Clayton, 1974; *Sting*, by G.R. Hill, 1973; *Murder on the Orient Express*, by S. Lumet, 1974). In Poland such function has been performed by the films of Jerzy Hoffman. The phenomenon is described with the melancholic tone.

Noble manor houses, rides in carriage, balls and beautiful receptions, beautiful and unhappy or beautiful and evil women in fabulous dresses, handsome men with flowers in buttonholes, great love stories which will not be erased by time. Suddenly, it turned out that the society of

¹⁵ G. Stachówna, *Niedole miłowania. Ideologia i perswazja w melodramatach filmowych*, Kraków 2001, pp. 85–88.

the People's Republic misses it, and wants to see it on the screen. It is undoubtedly a failure of many years of socialist education and, in a certain sense, the victory of the culture of the gentry. But it also is a proof for, on the one hand, the fact that the gentry was no longer the class enemy, it was allowed to talk about them with a clear sense of nostalgia and favor, and, on the other hand, a proof for the acceptance of Western influences and trends. All this characterizes in a way the era of Gierek, which involved opening to the West and showing that we 'can do this too', but also the nostalgia for the nobleness. The nobility began to be fashionable at that time. We can also mention a series *Czterdziestolatek* by J. Gruza from 1974–1976. In the episode entitled 'Expensive little thing or a return visit' the forty-year-old, who is being promoted, tries to forge himself a noble background and buys in *Desa* an image of a man from the upper classes from probably the 19th century, which is supposed to suggest to possible guests a non-proletarian background of the host. In other words, we can talk about the return of the nobility in a great style.

We can also include in the group of the films created on the wave of nostalgia the film *Hello Szpicbródka, or the Last Performance of The King of Safe-crackers* [*Hallo Szpicbródka, czyli ostatni występ króla kasiarzy*] (by J. Rzeszewski, 1978), and later *Vabank I* and *II* by J. Machulski, 1982 and 1985) and *Twenties... Thirties* [*Lata dwudzieste...lata trzydzieste*] (by J. Rzeszewski, 1984). Although the plot is situated in the artistic circles and the underworld of the interwar Poland, all these films provide a certain insight into the elites of those times who relish their lifestyle, but are also investing. Their representatives are not always honest, the origin of the capital that entrepreneurs administer is at times unclear. But still, that world seems beautiful and colorful. Much more pretty than the reality of Poland of the time of crises at the end of the 1970s or later, of the martial law.

The year of 1980 was followed by another political shift – it is the time of birth of 'Solidarność' accompanied by a hope for a possibility of change. It is wrecked with the introduction of martial law in December 1981. This way the last stage of the history of the Polish People's Republic begins. The stage which is very difficult for the society – it is a time of progressing pauperization, economic nightmare, the lack of hope for positive change, and also the time of mass emigration to the West¹⁶.

It is not the best time for mass culture – entertainment is rather unrefined and its creators more and more often appeal to primitive tastes.

¹⁶ All these phenomena are described in a very interesting way in the book: *Co nam zostało z tych lat... Społeczeństwo polskie u progu zmiany systemowej*, ed. M. Marody, London 1991.

Also for the cinema – despite quite sizable production and over a dozen of interesting films – it is a time of ‘regress and wasted opportunities’¹⁷. But despite this opinion, we should note that it is exactly when a new theme appears in the cinema, which earlier would have had limited chances to appear on screen. I think here about the interest in the Eastern Borderlands. It develops exactly in 1980s, and became even fashionable, and the culture of the Borderlands – earlier for political reasons not discussed too much – begins to be a subject of some fascination. The key film is here *The Issa Valley* [*Dolina Issy*], an adaptation of a novel of Czesław Miłosz, directed by Tadeusz Konwicki (1982). After remaining in the West, Miłosz was for several years not talked or written about. But when in 1980 he received a literary Nobel Prize, it was no longer possible to surround his figure with silence. The screening of *The Issa Valley* is an evidence for that. However, what is here more important – the plot is situated in the Borderlands, and the whole constitutes a nostalgic memory of childhood and youth. Complicated social, national and religious relations are showed here, but there is also a place for an image of the culture of the gentry developing in Kaunas Lithuania. That world, although complicated, full of strange entanglements, is, however, a subject of nostalgia. This way another areas are returned to the Polish culture and memory, and the gentry undergoes further process of rehabilitation.

Also the plot of *Nad Niemnem* (by Z. Kuźmiński, 1987), which is an adaptation of the prose of Eliza Orzeszkowa, is situated in the Borderlands. We have here a broad image of the gentry in the post-uprising times, both of the wealthy gentry as well as of petty farm gentry. The sympathy of the authors (both of the novel as well as of the film) is on the side of the latter. Its hard work, patriotism and attachment to the land is pointed out. Although also in the wealthy manor house we can find people of similar system of values, more often we can find here cosmopolitanism or following world fashions. The film is generally an eulogy of the gentry, it tries to meticulously recreate their everyday life, habits, outfits, way of speaking.

However, more interesting is a film by Tadeusz Chmielewski *The Faithful River* [*Wierna rzeka*] based on Stefan Żeromski’s novel. A screening of this novel was already an idea in the 1960s, but despite a positive assessment of the scenario, it was not realized. Finally, Chmielewski made the film in 1983, but the premiere took place four years later. The topic of national liberation, cruelty of Russian soldiers during the January Uprising

¹⁷ T. Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego. Twórcy, filmy, kontynenty*, Chorzów 2008, p. 441

showed in *The Faithful River* delayed the premiere¹⁸. Chmielewski portrays the gentry in a positive way, pointing out its patriotism and readiness for sacrifices. Also women are involved in the fight for independence, and when the uprising collapses, they mourn openly. This attitude is confronted with the stance of the peasants who are not interested in the fight for independent Poland. Interestingly, however, the main character Salomea (Małgorzata Pieczyńska) turns out more positively in Chmielewski's version than in the novel. She is not prejudiced against the class and is more patriotic as well.

Definitely less positive is the image of the gentry in *In an Old Manor House, or an Independence of Triangles* [*W starym dworku czyli niepodległość trójkątów*] (by A. Kotkowski, 1985). However, the critique was intended by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, the author of the drama that the film was based on. The gentry is interested here solely in their personal issues, gets involved in uncanny love affairs, also with spirits. Finally, a revolution breaks out, which will surely sweep everyone off the face of the earth. But even in this film we can see a certain nostalgia for the social class foredoomed by history.

The gentry also appears in the films serving entertainment (e.g. *Sobol i panna* by H. Drapella, 1983; *Wilczyca* by M. Piestrak, 1983) constituting each time an attractive and picturesque addition. Particularly in the horror *Wilczyca*, the gentry turns out oddly: a countess – she-wolf haunts the manor house of her ex-husband, misconducts, and finally dies fortunately killed with a special bullet. So, the times when an appearance of a representative of the nobility on the screen had to be very seriously ideologically justified, passed.

(translated by Anna Topolska)

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STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł prezentuje sposób przedstawiania klas wyższych w polskim filmie fabularnym w latach 1947–1989. Filmy zostały potraktowane tu jako rodzaj źródła historycznego, podległego wpływowi politycznym. Klasy wyższe po II wojnie światowej zostały skazane w Polsce na zagładę. W okresie socrealizmu w sztuce pokazywano je zawsze negatywnie. Ale w połowie lat pięćdziesiątych obraz ten zaczął ulegać zmianie. Pojawił się pewien sentyment w przedstawianiu przeszłości, ale też i ograniczona nobilitacja. Szczególnie widoczne jest to w latach siedemdziesiątych. Z kolei w latach osiemdziesiątych pojawiają się tematy wcześniej nieobecne, jak np. obraz ziemiaństwa kresowego w czasach II RP.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, film, klasa wyższa, propaganda

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