

Representations of Female Sexuality in Polish cinema after 1989

By Elżbieta Ostrowska

Spring 2005 Issue of KINEMA

REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN POLISH CINEMA AFTER 1989: LIBERATION OR COMMODIFICATION?

IN CONSIDERING the issue of female sexuality in Polish cinema after 1989 it is necessary to locate it within the broader context of the Polish ideological discourse on femininity and the representation of sexuality in Polish cinema. First, it can be claimed that specific historical circumstances resulted in the domination of national issues over that of gender, and that gender roles were predominantly defined according to the demands of the national ideology of Polishness. The origins of the Polish dominant discourse on femininity can be found in the 19th century, particularly when the myth of the Polish Mother was created. ⁽¹⁾

The analysis of representations of this myth in Polish art demonstrates strongly that they were based on the tradition of the representation of the Virgin Mary. Using this representative model inevitably led to a de-sexualization of images of women in Polish art. Conditioned by this collective historical experience, the individual experience of Polish women who had often lost their husbands and fiancés in the numerous uprisings resulted in what I would call "a secondary virginity" characteristic of the representations of women. The myth of the Polish Mother, which can be considered the dominant model of femininity developed in the Polish cultural discourse, was, for obvious reasons, maintained in the post-war period, when the oppressive regime of the Soviet Union was treated as a continuation of previous partitions.

It is worth mentioning here a strange compatibility of the Polish national discourse with that of the communists in terms of female sexuality. Though for different reasons, both deprived women of their sexuality or rather subsumed it into different, "higher" values, patriotic and proletarian aims respectively. This process of the sublimation of sexuality resulted in a virtual absence of its representation in Polish cinema. It should also be said that sexuality itself has rarely been addressed in Polish film criticism up to this point. A short essay "Romans z władzą" ("Love-affair with the Authorities") ⁽²⁾ by the film director, Jerzy Krysiak, is one of the few which attempted this. He claims that the discourse around sexuality relates to political changes in Poland. (In fact, the essay is a kind of commentary on his documentary entitled, *Polska jest kobietą* (*Poland is a Woman*). Since Krysiak's essay was published in 1990, it does not discuss the recent history of Polish cinema, that which followed the collapse of communism in 1989. He merely adds one sentence about this period: "sex-shops were opened... Does this relate to cinema in any way, one could ask. Perhaps it does, if we take into account a popular strand of Polish cinema, which developed rapidly in the beginning of the 90s.

"All women are whores" says one of the male heroes of *Kroll* (1991), a film made by Władysław Pasikowski, a representative of the young generation of Polish filmmakers, who began their film careers after 1989. The further development of the plot confirms this statement without any ambiguity or hesitation. The same concerns another film by Pasikowski, *Psy* (*The Pigs*, 1992). The female characters in Pasikowski's movies seem to be constructed as a radical opposition to the traditional representational pattern and this is noticeable already through their physical appearance. Tall, slim, shorthaired, dark-haired women represent a somewhat different anthropological type from the one we would tend to call "typically Polish". Moreover, their life-attitude and behaviour are in radical opposition to what in Polish culture has traditionally been ascribed to the feminine, and which was perfectly embodied in the myth of the Polish Mother. As far as the myth is concerned, it may be argued that Pasikowski symbolically eliminates it from the realm of his representations of the new reality. This occurs in one of the first scenes of *Kroll* when the hero's mother is called to search for her son, who has deserted his military unit. She appears as a weak and helpless person and finally succumbs to a heart attack. The mother, disenfranchised from the outset, disappears and his friends undertake the traditional "maternal" task of protecting the son. This narrative turn functions to establish a male-oriented story, a generic form virtually absent in the Polish cultural system of representation before this.

The initial break up of the dominant model of representing women is continued, or even strengthened, through

the character of the hero's wife. The first time we see her is in a photo of her and her husband's best friend. This idyllic image of the past life is brutally, as well as ironically, contrasted with reality when a few scenes later we see them both, the hero's wife and his friend having sex. The scene of the betrayal is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the female character is introduced to the diegetic world through her sexuality - sexuality here metonymically signifying "feminine evil" - the element usually absent in the "virginal" figure of the Polish Mother. Secondly, as the betrayal occurs while her husband is serving in the army, it means in fact the most serious violation of the moral code imposed on women by the national ideology. The set of national myths and attendant images is not only destroyed by Pasikowski but also ridiculed, as in a story told by the lieutenant about an episode which took place in December 1981 (when martial law was introduced). The story concerns a soldier who defended a woman against the militia, only later to learn she was a prostitute who had been hired by them. One could argue that here, instead of performing the traditional role of the supporter and guardian of the national myth, the woman ridicules it and discloses its "emptiness" or incompatibility with "real life".

In Pasikowski's films, both men and women openly commodify female sexuality. The main female character in *The Pigs*, Angela, a priest's daughter living in a shelter for girls, says to the main hero after he buys her a meal: "So, now you can fuck me" adding that it is what everybody does to her. She presents herself as a "small hooker" with neither shame nor anger. This turns out to be paradoxically both true and false. Later on, the viewers learn that she is a virgin, which is, however, a detail of small importance compared to her betrayal of the main hero, when he loses all his luxury property, and decides to offer her sexual services to his more prosperous friend. Again, Pasikowski questions and brutally ridicules another myth about femininity which is deeply rooted in the Polish collective consciousness, that of virginity.

The complex game that Pasikowski plays with the viewers' expectations of the heroine's activity and her personality seems to aim at deconstructing, and finally destroying the most pervasive mythological images of women which were formerly central to the Polish cultural discourse. While for a very long time, the Polish feminine was deprived of sexuality, in Pasikowski's movies, his new heroines are characterised by its excess. Moreover, female sexuality is represented as the main destructive power, which threatens, and may destroy male friendship. Pasikowski is replacing the traditional solidarity of Polish women and men against the enemies of the nation, with a rampantly solipsistic Polish male solidarity contemptuous of a relegated, clearly subordinate Polish femininity. He thus brings an antagonistic sexual difference to the fore. Polish women are now proposed as "Others", the role previously reserved exclusively for enemies of the motherland. This "otherness" is articulated mainly in terms of a treacherous sexuality and expressed not only through narrative but also through visual devices.

Pasikowski often uses very conventional shots that fragment the female body, which obviously results in its conspicuous objectification. *Mise-en-scène* devices, in turn, are used to spatially separate women from men, visually articulating a gender conflict. Two scenes reveal this in a very striking way. In the first one we see Franz, the main male hero, talking to Olo, his best friend and a former colleague, who now collaborates with the mafia. Their conversation concerns the current situation in the country that Franz sees as a total moral crisis stemming from political changes since 1989. All Franz's bitter remarks suggest the idealism hidden behind his cynicism. While the men are sitting face to face, Angela is placed behind Franz, in the background, as if she were his shadow.

This spatial marginalisation, or exclusion even, of the female character is reinforced by the fact that her image is out of focus, which reduces her to a mere contour of femininity deprived entirely of any trait of subjectivity. However, here for once, she is included in the situation. This occurs when Olo asks Franz the question: "Have you ever thought about big money, to gain it, really big money, let's say a million bucks?" In this moment the previous editing pattern of shot-reverse-shot, which alternately shows Franz and Olo is broken, since following the shot of Olo, we see Angela. Then, we see that it is she who responds to Olo's question and not Franz, who neglects it and continues to speak about all his worries.

This editing pattern builds up a symptomatic triangular relationship between the characters, in which Olo and Angela are linked through their concern for money, whereas Franz remains alone with his idealistic worries. This scene anticipates the further development of the story as is shown in the next scene, when Angela comes to Olo's place to have sex with him. The *mise-en-scène* (setting - bed in the empty room;

and the placement of their bodies: Angela's back turned towards Olo), lighting (cold, grey-blue) and cinematographic devices (camera high angle), used in this scene are making this sexual act almost mechanical, anonymous and deprived of any emotions. All these devices build up a distance between the viewer and characters, precluding any emotional response to the situation on the part of the viewer. The whole scene echoes what Angela has said to Franz before: "This is *only* sex."

Pasikowski stresses the existence of gender differences on a narrative and visual level without any attempt to negotiate them, or to find a positive narrative resolution. Through this, the director also openly discloses a subjectively male position from which the story is told, which results in his admission that the binary opposition We-men/They-women is by no means a neutral one. "I do not feel like talking to you" says Franz to his treacherous ex-girlfriend who visits him in prison with the hope of re-establishing their relationship. The gap between men and women, whose existence was obscured for such a long time and as such left unspoken, is open again, or rather newly established.

An interesting contribution to this gender debate is *Pestka* (Stone, 1995), the directorial debut of a famous Polish actress, Krystyna Janda. Due to her role in Andrzej Wajda's *Człowiek z marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, 1977) and many others, she functions almost as a symbol of the independent, self-assured, if not liberated, woman. The more surprising then, was her decision to use melodrama, which is usually considered a conservative genre in terms of its ideological meaning. Yet, if we take into account the virtual absence of this genre in Polish post-war cinema, the movie could be treated as an effort at gendering the Polish film audience, previously perceived as a homogenous entity.

What, therefore, is the message conveyed by Janda for women, and how is female sexuality constructed through the melodramatic plot? The answer to this question is given in an indirect way in the very beginning of the film. The very first shot shows us a Church interior, where a wedding ceremony is taking place. Next, we see a woman driving a car. This is, we learn later, Agata, the main heroine, played by Janda herself. The same soundtrack of the previous images of the wedding accompanies this image. Through the use of this overlapping sound bridge, the image of an active woman is associated with the words of the standard text of the Roman Catholic confession. A notion of sin becomes a point of reference for this single, active woman. Parallel editing joins these two plot lines up to the point when the woman arrives at the church. Instead of sitting down in the last row of benches, as every modest woman would do, she proudly and provocatively walks in her high-heel shoes to the front pews to observe the wedding ceremony of her younger female friend Sabina.

The next scene is similarly symptomatic. It takes place when the wedding ceremony is finished and Sabina, after enthusiastically greeting Agata, asks her to give a lift to her friends, Borys and his wife, Teresa. Unfortunately, the car does not work. Agata steps out of the car, lights a cigarette and tries to check the engine. Immediately a man appears, ready to help "a beautiful woman". She laughs loudly and talks to him without any hindrance or embarrassment. When she comes back to the car, still smoking her cigarette, she silently exchanges looks with Teresa in the rear-view mirror. Agata immediately throws her cigarette away through the roof-window and says "sorry" receiving a cold "thank you" in response from Teresa. Then there is a close-up of the lighted cigarette as the wheel of the car crushes it. The visual emphasis placed on this small episode makes its meaning more than obvious. Then the final credit appears bearing the film's title and the whole story develops in a direction, which is easy to predict. Agata establishes a love affair with Borys, which is for her a pure embodiment of the idea of romantic love. However, when Borys decides to leave his wife and children, she chooses to commit suicide.

What I would like to discuss here in more detailed way is the issue of female sexuality as represented in Janda's film in relation to the concept of romantic love.⁽³⁾ This general conceptual framework of romantic love explains a notable difference in the way Agata experiences her own sexuality as well as the visual patterns employed for its representation. By and large, before falling in love with Borys, Agata wears clothes, which can be stereotypically called sexy. After attaining an emotional, though tragic, fulfilment she changes her wardrobe to dark, modest and more elegant garments. The change is also articulated through her behaviour. While "before" she can be consistently seen laughing loudly, "after" she cries the majority of the time. "Before" she behaves spontaneously, like a small child, provocatively neglecting all rules of good manners, "after" she becomes more modest, perfectly conforming the pattern of "mature femininity". The

film's use of one particular prop, that is, Agata's dark glasses, focuses the viewer's attention. Initially, Agata wears them all the time, which distances her from others giving her, in addition, the possibility of looking freely at other people, including men, a privilege of which women are usually deprived in cinema. After she begins her "serious" romantic relationship with Borys, she takes her dark glasses off, exposing all her vulnerability and pain.

Through these means, Agata is presented as a woman who undergoes a profound transformation, from being an independent, professionally and sexually active woman ⁽⁴⁾ into one who is submissive and passive. Initially it is she who is sexually active in her relationship with Borys. She apparently tries to seduce him, touching him in an effort to imbue this acquaintance with some intimacy. Later on, when her friend Sabina asks her: "Couldn't you resist it? she answers, Resist? Sabina, he didn't want it, he was afraid. It was I who wanted it. I had prayed for him not to be afraid". Camera work emphasises Agata's active sexual role through close shots of parts of her body. This visibility vanishes when the couple consummates their relationship. This transformation occurs in an almost literal way in the scene when Borys comes for the first time to Agata's place. She lets him in and slams the door in front of the camera and viewers as well. After a fade out, we jump into the next scene.

Further on, the film includes a significant number of short sentimental scenes, which are only loosely connected with the plot and were probably conceived as images of the couple's joy and, respectively, sorrow. Therefore, we see them dancing on, or under, a bridge, performing in a more or less bizarre way a "spectacle of love". All these moments are filmed in long shot. To resume, a particular rule has been established in this movie: the more sexually intimate the relationship the less visible. This gradually increasing invisibility of the performance of female sexuality seems to be a perfect confirmation of Angela McRobbie's remark on the ideology of romance as a displacement of the "traces of adolescent sexuality" and a replacement of these "with concepts of love, passion and eternity". ⁽⁵⁾ Unexpectedly, viewers of *Stone* come across a very similar belief, which is also expressed in Pasikowski's movie, that sexuality has not much to do with real love.

For Anka, the main heroine of *Jak narkotyk* (*Like a Drug*, 1999) by Barbara Sass-Zdort, love and sexuality are inseparable, as she once says to one of many men whom she meets on her way: "Love is when your legs are trembling, when your lips are wet, and that's a state, which I love, which I need". Her "I" is strongly expressed from the very first scene of the film. In the first shot, we see her behind the bars of a confessional. However, instead of confessing her sins, she speaks her own love lyrics, and, instead of condemning her because of this almost blasphemous act, the priest asks her: "Do you still write about love? Did you fall in love?" He concludes by saying: "Go away now, otherwise all these old bigots will kill me."

Soon we learn that Anka is terminally ill due to heart disease. She goes to a sanatorium where she meets a young man, Piotr, with whom she falls in love. Therefore, a narrative situation ensues that is typical of the melodramatic plot: a young dying poetess meets a boy... Barbara Sass-Zdort reverses this conventional narrative scheme in a radical way. Before long Anka marries Piotr, who after some time commits suicide because of his schizophrenia. Then she goes to London to have surgery, which ends in success. After an intensive love affair with her doctor, she comes back to Poland to continue her pursuit of self-fulfilment. The long and contradictory process of constructing her identity is presented mainly through her sexual activities. What should be emphasised here particularly strongly, is that all of this is seen from her own subjective perspective. This process of self-definition as represented in this film is occurring in Polish cinema for the very first time.

Anka's sexuality cannot be easily and ultimately defined. There is no stable context or framework within which it can be placed. She treats her sexuality as a simple and basic attribute of her existence, which is changeable and full of rapid turns and contradictions. She is sexually active during her terminal illness firstly in an attempt to overcome her fear of death and to use her time as fully as possible, but later to confirm the miracle of her surgical "re-birth". Further on in the film, having sex is variously, a joy for her, but also an accidental event, or even an act of masochism. This variability refers to all levels of her life and is marked by Anka's changes of hair colour, style of garment and the places in which she chooses to live. Her search for identity is signified through her mobility, which appears to be her main characteristic and is expressed by means of narrative as well as mise-en-scène solutions, reinforced through camera work. In the beginning of the film, we see her constantly running, she moves from one place to another, while the hand held camera

films her story in a nervous movement as if in an effort to adjust to her vibrant bodily rhythm and actions. In contrast, the men in the film are usually consigned to particular spaces, chosen more or less accidentally.

Also, Anka does not allow anybody to control her sexuality. When her parents and her doctor try to persuade her not to marry Piotr because sexual activity could be fatal in her state of health, she demonstrates her resistance to their persuasions in an almost exaggerated way. Needless to say, she does what she wants. She also refuses to fulfil the expectations of others, to put other people's emotional needs above her own. In the scene when she is making love for the very first time with Piotr, her new husband, who expresses his worries that she did not have an orgasm, she answers: "If you love somebody, you can stand it". Female sexuality, as exercised by Anka, appears to be in radical opposition to the passivity usually ascribed to it. It is she who usually takes an initiative, which, however, remains far from the stereotypical image of the "castrating woman". This feminine subjective position is expressed also through visual solutions, by means of which Anka always occupies a privileged place in the frame. Many in the audience might judge her behaviour as selfish, and indeed a female friend calls it exactly such. However, self-interest is not so easily misinterpreted as selfishness in *Like a Drug*. There is also in the film yet another intensely strange relationship, this time with the fantastic figure of a small girl, constructed as Anka's youthful alter ego. This child represents that moment for woman before the great closing down of possibility which Anka once had, and seeks to find once again.

Generally, Anka is presented neither as a loser nor a winner. Similarly, her sexuality is not constructed in a definite way: it is neither sublimated nor degraded. The portrayal of Anka goes far beyond the stereotypical images of woman used in cinematic systems of representation. The open-ended final scene of the film, a visionary scene of Anka and her girlish alter ego jumping from the bridge into a river, requires the viewer to suspend all our desires for a comfortable resolution.

To conclude, the issue of female sexuality, almost unspoken in Polish cinema up to 1989, has been addressed during the last ten years in a relatively direct way. The three radically divergent examples analysed here could be perceived as a kind of turning point since they are somehow an effort to re-negotiate the issue of gender in Polish culture, even if their position is apparently anti-feminist, as in Pasikowski's films. Indeed, those representations of female sexuality, which are articulated from an openly male position, result in its objectification and commodification, typical of popular culture. In Janda's film, female sexuality is, in turn, suppressed by a romantic love pattern, which is considered a means of patriarchal control over it. The third strand of this debate on gender and sexuality, to be found in Barbara Sass-Zdort's film, has been so far silenced by what I would call the continuing patriarchal ideologies of the film market in the new Poland. Clearly, a woman who gives herself to herself to this extent remains a threat.

Notes

Acknowledgement: Thanks to Michael Stevenson for his help in preparing this article.

1. For further reading on the myth of the Polish Mother see my article "Filmic Representations of the "Polish Mother" in Post-Second World War Polish Cinema", *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 5, 1998, London: SAGE Publications, p. 419-435.
2. Jerzy Krysiak, *Romans z wadz*, *Kino* 1990, n. 8, p.16-19.
3. For a further reading on Janda's *Pestka* in relation to the concept of romantic love, see Ewa Mazierska, "Victims of patriarchy - Polish women's pictures in the 1990s" (unpublished paper).
4. The equation between professionally and sexually active has been noted in relation to Hollywood cinema by Yvonne Tasker: "Across a variety of popular genres, Hollywood representation is characterised by an insistent equation between working women, women's work and some form of sexual(-ised) performance." Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls. Gender and sexuality in Popular Cinema*, Routledge: London and New York 1998, p. 3.
5. Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*. Basingstoke: Macmillan 1991, p. 107; quoted in: Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, Manchester and New

York: Manchester University Press 2000, p. 74.

Author Information

Elżbieta OSTROWSKA teaches film in Department of Media and Audiovisual Culture, University of Łódź, Poland. Her publications include *The Cinema of Andrzej Wajda: The Art of Irony and Defiance* (co-ed. John Orr). She was visiting fellow at the Reading University, the Sussex University, and the University of Pittsburgh. She lectured at the University of Regensburg, Roehampton Institute (London), and the University of Chicago.