

THE POLISH FEMME FATALE— IDEOLOGICAL DEMAND VERSUS VISUAL PLEASURE

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In one of the early articles devoted to the star persona of Krystyna Janda, published in 1978 in the women's magazine *Zwierciadło* (*Mirror*), the author describes her performance of the song *Chewing Gum* (*Guma do żucia*) at the National Festival of Polish Song at Opole in following way: "It was one of the most provocative erotic spectacles we have ever seen [...]. She triumphantly incarnated a dominant femininity and rejuvenated the style of earlier screen 'vamps', the closest being Marlene Dietrich" (SoB 1978).

Today it is difficult to understand the reason for dwelling on the erotic message of *Chewing Gum* instead of the political significance of Janda's role in *Człowiek z marmuru* (*Man of Marble*, Andrzej Wajda, 1977). It might be claimed that her provocative performance at this highly popular musical event, broadcast by Polish television in prime time, may have made her more popular than her role in *Man of Marble*, which had only a limited distribution in cinemas. Yet the article may well be seen as an effort to construct Janda as a female film star of the kind that had been absent in the Polish cinema of the communist era.¹ To be precise, this was a film star who could evoke a female sexuality to be desired as well as feared: a vamp, a femme fatale. It is worth mentioning that the first and the only genuine vamp figure in Polish cinema was embodied by Pola Negri. Polish pre-war cinematic audiences did not enjoy her presence on her home screen for long, however. "Discovered" by Ernst Lubitsch, she made her way to the United States successfully replacing Theda Bara, an earlier icon of the Hollywood vamp. Tellingly, both in the pre-war and post-war period, there was no other Polish actress to replace Negri's persona. In analyzing dominant representations of women in Polish cinema before 1989 there is, rather, an abundance of female characters based on variants of the national icon of the Polish Mother,

deprived of any sexuality, and, as such, in radical opposition to the vamp and femme fatale. Cultural and ideological strategies used by both the communist regime and a necessarily defensive nationalist discourse attempted to deny female sexuality and to erase it from cinematic representation; these strategies were not entirely successful however.

308 A closer scrutiny of Polish films made before 1989 shows that female sexuality in fact was not and, indeed, could not be fully repressed but was rather relocated into marginal areas of representations of femininity. Significantly, these representations of female sexuality were most often articulated through figures that may be regarded as vernacular variants of the femme fatale type. The first examples of this type of female character can, surprisingly, be found in socialist realist films of the 50s.² The repressed female sexuality of the positive heroines, the Polish Superwomen, was often displaced onto their negative counterparts. These women are usually presented as deprived of a communist consciousness, and strongly attached to pre-war petit bourgeois feminine aspirations for fashion and a handsome partner. The most conspicuous example of this type of heroine is Janeczka (Barbara Drapińska) from *Autobus odjeżdża 6.20* (*The Bus Leaves at 6.20*, Jan Rybkowski, 1954). She works as a minor clerk at the steelworks where both the main female character, Krystyna, and her husband are employed. Janeczka first appears in a scene that takes place in the steelworks office, when Krystyna comes to apply for a job. The two women are contrasted with each other through multiple signs: modest and unfashionable clothes vs. an elegant dress exposing the curves of the body; plain, “natural” beauty vs. intense make-up highlighting sensuous lips; shy, yet dignified behaviour vs. arrogance. To complete this image of the “evil woman” as a reversal of the “angelic femininity” embodied in Krystyna, Janeczka is equipped with an indispensable accessory of the femme fatale: a cigarette (cf. Place 1998, 54).

If the wearing of masculine work clothes on the part of the socialist realist heroine was intended to attenuate or blur gender difference between positive male and female icons, the prop of a cigarette renders this weakened division visible again. There is no instance of a heroic female smoker in any of these films, whereas all of the male heroes smoke. Clearly, male smoking is positively associated with a working lifestyle, whereas female smoking signifies “a bad woman.” If a cigarette is to be read as a phallic fetish, between the lips of a woman it can also signify a predatory and castrating female. No wonder that the positive heroines cannot be seen to indulge in the pleasures of smoking, whereas it is a predominant attribute of their negative counterparts, who are eventually punished or simply eliminated in the course of the narrative. This is the case with Janeczka, who plays the role of a femme fatale in the story (perhaps it would be better to call her a caricature of this type due to the character’s simplification), and who endangers Krystyna’s marriage. She seduces Krystyna’s husband, convinces him to start working as a clerk, though he is a talented electrician, and finally entices him into a life of crime. From the perspective of communist propaganda all of this was a downfall into a petit bourgeois lifestyle or

worse. Of course, the precepts of socialist realism “save” the hero from the downfall he would have experienced in film noir. Once he realises all the wrongs he has committed under the influence of this “bad woman,” he comes to fully respect his wife’s accomplishments and devotion, finally deciding to go back to her.

This pattern, whereby female sexuality is located in and identified with “bad” female characters, is repeated with even greater clarity in *Pierwsze dni* (*First Days*, Jan Rybkowski, 1951). These two examples demonstrate that socialist realism employed two main strategies to negotiate female sexuality. In the case of positive female characters sexuality is at first repressed, then displaced into a surrogate form through professional competition with men, to be finally and positively resolved through a narrative pattern of heterosexual romance, complicit with patriarchal order. In contrast, the “bad” female figure is provided with all the overt signs of female sexuality/sensuality, but is ultimately punished for this, either literally or by her simple eradication from the fictional world. It seems evident that the “good” female, whose sexuality is controlled and subsumed by the needs of society, is to be seen as a proponent of a new communist order and the “bad,” with her overt sexuality with its potential power over men, as her opponent. In this respect these films reproduced exactly the fearful and repressive myths regarding female sexuality that were inherent within the patriarchal ideology they presumed to question. The complicity of socialist cinema with patriarchal discourse is further strengthened, as the images of a vernacular type of femme fatale served not only as an “ideological enemy” to be punished within the narrative trajectory but also to provide the male viewer with “visual pleasure” coming from gazing at a sexualised female body. The representation of women in these films discloses a disconcerting gap between the pro-feminist propagandistic message offered by the story line and the level of persistent patriarchal “visual” pleasure.

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This vernacular type of femme fatale is also to be found in *Damned Roads* (*Baza ludzi umarłych*, Czesław Petelski, 1959). The film belongs to the so-called “black-series” movement in Polish cinema that emerged after political changes in 1956 that were conceived as a radical questioning of the propagandistic message of the Stalinist films. If the socialist realist films offered an idyllic vision of life in a “communist paradise,” the “black series” documentaries and features pictured this reality in a radically pessimistic way. Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska proposes that these films display some stylistic and thematic affinities with American film noir (Nurczyńska-Fidelska 1998). Marek Haltof shares this opinion and notices among other things that, “Wanda [the wife of the protagonist], the only female in this male-oriented world, the equivalent of a *film noir* femme fatale, dreams of escaping from this god-forsaken place with any willing man” (Haltof 2002, 81).

Indeed, Wanda (Teresa Iżewska) seems to be selfish and determined to achieve her aim, that is to leave for town, to have a better life than she has in the middle of nowhere as does her American prototype. Her marriage also mirrors the pattern of male/female relationships dominating in film noir as it does not lead to the estab-

lishing of a sanctified family but rather endangers and destroys it. As Sylvia Harvey notes, "The sterility, in conventional family terms, of the central male/female relationships in film noir (and often these relationships are unfavourably contrasted with male/male relationship) is further emphasised by the childlessness of the couples" (Harvey 1998, 45). Wanda's married life is limited to the space of one big room occupied by another five men and as such is utterly deprived of the intimacy associated with family life. Moreover, she does not have a child and she seems to treat her own sexuality as entirely detached from its sanctified reproductive task. Rather she becomes the opposite of this, openly commodifying her own sexuality in offering it to all the men as a "prize" for taking her back to the town. Certainly, her act of "trading" her body to find the one who will be able to help her to achieve her aims results in a perverse competition between the men, consequently destroying of bonds of loyalty that previously tied these outcast friends together.

310 Yet, under closer scrutiny Wanda also differs from her American counterpart in a significant way. The most radical difference is her relative passivity. Unlike the female protagonists of film noir, and even Janeczka from *The Bus Leaves at 6.20*, she is not an active agent in the narrative trajectory. She does not try to seduce or to manipulate the men who surround her, rather she responds passively to their sexual advances. Certainly, this is more than enough to endanger their masculinity and to deprive them of their power. Her relationship with the character Partyzant (Tadeusz Łomnicki) seems the most symptomatic in this respect. This young man who had spent the whole war fighting in an underground unit loses all his strength and bravery once he becomes involved in a sexual relationship with Wanda. He starts acting like a coward and blames her for this; he says to her he could not accomplish his desire to prove his masculine power in front of his friends because he was thinking about her. His elaborately constructed image of himself as a strong and brave man is instantly ruined due to his sexual and emotional involvement with Wanda. Unable to stand his companions' ruthless mockery, he finally decides to run away under the cover of night.

Thus, the female protagonist of *Damned Roads* does not have to undertake any activity to display her "castrating power" over men who get close to her. Her fatal presence suffices to break up the homosocial bonds that tie them closely to one another. Certainly, she must be punished for this. Not only punished, but also humiliated. Close to the ending of the film, Warszawiak (Emil Karewicz), the ugliest of all, who Wanda had not even considered as a prospective "saviour," takes revenge on her. He literally throws mud at her, depriving her of her feminine beauty and attractiveness. The last scene in which she appears on the screen confirms her final degradation and humiliation. When Warszawiak and Orsaczek (Roman Kłosowski) go to the town to drown their despair over the death of one of their friends, they see her drunk in a bar as she passively accepts the sexual advances of men sitting around. It is clear that she is now a prostitute. Interestingly enough, Warszawiak hides this painful truth from her husband, displaying a sensitivity no one would expect from him. This aes-

thetic degradation of a Polish femme fatale might be seen as a departure from her American counterpart. It is sufficient to recall here the image of the dying Phyllis from *Double Indemnity* who is finally punished, but at the same time is retained as a glamorous image of femininity. However, Wanda might also be compared to the heroine of *Sunset Boulevard* who, similarly, is aesthetically degraded at the end of the film.³ However, Norma Desmond's degradation signifies her madness, whereas Wanda's humiliation clearly stems from the revenging action undertaken by male protagonists. What is also significant is that Warszawiak and her husband to some extent resist her "fatal attraction" and consequently are saved from a final downfall. Communist ideology demanded optimistic endings, so the director was required to change the ending of Marek Hłasko's short story *Next Stop—Paradise* upon which the script was based. Instead of the bitter image of a lonely protagonist left by his wife as well as his friends, the audience was offered the optimistic image of two men who despite all of their misfortunes are ready to undertake the noble task of building the new socialist paradise. Thus, the ideological message deprived this vernacular femme fatale of her otherwise destructive power over men. Once again, patriarchy matched with communist precepts.

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A very similar act of the aesthetic degradation of this Polish variant of the femme fatale, once again depriving her of a destructive power over men, can be found in Andrzej Wajda's *Ziemia obiecana* (*The Promised Land*, 1975). This film can also be seen as a film extensively borrowing from the generic structures of popular cinema. In fact, Wajda himself confirms this. When recollecting his project to adapt Reymont's novel, he said: "For the first time, I made a film about money and about people who want to get it at all costs. I always wanted to make such an 'American' film." (Wajda 1996, 41). Indeed, for obvious political reasons, material wealth had not been a subject matter explored by national Polish literature and cinema. No wonder then that Wajda, in making this film, had to turn towards a different artistic tradition than the Polish romanticism that he had followed in his previous films. Structures within American genre cinema are thus of use for this story about three young men, a Pole, a German, and a Jew, who, having nothing, decide to go and make their fortune in the newly founded city of Łódź.

In her essay on *The Promised Land*, Ewelina Nurczyńska-Fidelska claims that the characters in Wajda's film "become archetypal models of romantic and action film narratives—a gangster, a ringleader, a profiteer, a usurer, a hired killer, a femme fatale, a lyrical beauty" (Nurczyńska-Fidelska 2003, 152). Significantly, the figure of the femme fatale is embodied in a Jewish woman, whereas the "lyrical beauty" is a Polish noble woman who conforms perfectly to the ideal of Polish femininity. Thus, they are contrasted in a way that fits with Janey Place's description of the bi-polar construction of femininity in film noir: "The dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction ... She and her sister (or *alter ego*), the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer, form the two poles

of female archetypes ... the dark lady has access to it and the virgin does not" (Place 1998, 47).

Tellingly, not only the female characters in Wajda's film are represented in accordance with the generic norms of film noir. He also transforms the male protagonist of Reymont's novel in order to make him fit this structure. Karol Borowiecki (Daniel Olbrychski) is an impoverished Polish nobleman who moves to Łódź to achieve success as a capitalist entrepreneur. This decision means abandoning the ethos of the gentrified rural life lived by his ancestors and accepting the tough rules of a rampant, newly established capitalism. This is strikingly similar to that typical of the male protagonist of film noir as described by Place: "He has no reference points, no moral base from which to confidently operate. Any previous framework is cut loose and morality becomes relative, both externally (the world) and internally (the character and his relations to his work, his friends, his sexuality). Values, like identities, are constantly shifting and must be redefined at every turn" (Place 1998, 51).

312 Karol's problem with his own identity is multi-levelled as it concerns his problematic position in relation to social, national, and psychosexual subjectivities. The latter seems to be especially interesting as this is a subject that had not previously been explored by Wajda. In fact, through borrowing from the generic patterns of popular cinema, he constructs in *The Promised Land* a narrative that realizes an Oedipal trajectory usually absent in his other films. As noted elsewhere, in Wajda's films the male protagonists are most often represented as "sons" who permanently obey the father. In the process of attempting to become a man—especially in terms of psychosexual adulthood—there is a constant deferral, the father blocks the path towards this (cf. Ostrowska 2003, 62). However, for the first time in Wajda's work, Karol's character radically departs from this pattern but at the same time he does not straightforwardly fulfil the scheme of Freudian family romance.

Importantly, his father is a powerless figure and his mother is absent (it might be added here that this pattern is quite typical of cultural representations of the Polish family). Consequently, the possibility of resolving Karol's Oedipal complex is blocked from the very beginning. Although his decision to leave the family manor house might well be seen as an apparent act of rebellion against paternal authority, it is deprived of its significance due to the powerlessness of his father. When the old man finally decides to sell his property to join Karol in Łódź, in the urban capitalist world, he appears as a strikingly anachronistic figure, deprived of any traits of authority. Unable to perform a genuine act of rebellion against paternal authority, Karol is also blocked in his pre-Oedipal desire towards his mother due to her premature death and also in that she is idealized as a memory in which she resembles his asexual fiancée Anka (Anna Nehrebecka). Having parents unable to perform the roles prescribed by the Freudian family romance, Karol needs to find surrogate figures for this.

The Zuckers, a Jewish couple in Łódź, turn out to be perfect personas to fit an Oedipal scenario. He is an old, respected man and also rich enough to hold power over other men, who are both younger and poorer, and last, but not least, he has a

beautiful wife, Lucy (Kalina Jędrusik), who serves as an object of desire for Karol. Apparently she is a trophy wife, much younger than her husband. However, she is older than Karol, which lends some perversity to their relationship, as she can be seen as a somewhat maternal figure. If Lucy and Anka are to be compared it is clear that the former is a woman, whereas the latter appears and acts as a girl. Clearly, for Karol it is Lucy who serves as an object of sexual desire, however, she belongs to another man who is also a figure of paternal authority.

Karol, in order to achieve his desire, has to make an effort to annihilate the power of this surrogate symbolic father through a double questioning of his authority. He wants to beat him in both an economic and sexual sense. Inevitably, he must be punished for this act of transgression. And he is punished. His “surrogate father” arranges the arson of Karol’s factory, thus precipitating his bankruptcy. A symbolic castration of Karol is accomplished and he has to submit to the Law of the Father. Consequently, he must admit that another type of woman will need to be found to replace the idealized figure of maternal femininity, symbolically embodied in the purity of nurturing Anka and bold sexuality of Lucy. Karol finally decides to marry Mada Müller (Bożena Dykiel), a culturally primitive and unattractive German woman, yet with a huge dowry. Thus he gains an ultimate power, which is a combination of economic and sexual authority (one may say a perfect combination of Freud and Marx). In the last scene we see him ordering the shooting of protesting workers at his factory. Now he is “a real man” but not “a real Pole” any longer. For according to the precepts of Polish Romanticism (still, for Wajda, a paradigm of Polish culture) a Polish leader may only have moral authority and never economic or sexual power. 313

It may seem paradoxical that Wajda despite his claim that he “wasn’t raised on Freud’s textbook” (Wertenstein 2000, 47) follows his concepts with an almost perverse accuracy. In using the Freudian “family romance,” he also, consciously or not, discloses a problematic relationship between gender and national identity in Polish culture. *The Promised Land* demonstrates that being a man—an adult man in terms of psychosexual subjectivity—is in an inescapable conflict with being a Polish man, who is obliged to undertake the mission of his father and worship his mother as an idealized icon of the Polish Mother, a perfect amalgam of Christian and national imagery. Anka, a perfect embodiment of this icon, entirely deprived of sexuality, cannot be desired, feared or be punished. Lucy appears as a radical reversal of this. She is the “other” woman in a double sense, firstly, as a femme fatale she comes from the “other” aesthetic tradition of film noir, and, secondly, she is “other” due her Jewishness. However, her presence is necessary if the male protagonist is to complete an Oedipal trajectory, for she is a sexual being and serves as an object of a perverse sexual desire. She belongs to a symbolic paternal figure and also represents an “other” ethnicity, which taints Karol’s desire for her with the danger of miscegenation. This doubly perverse desire is radically against the Law of the Father. Certainly, Lucy is eventually deprived of all of her sexual power in a way similar to Wanda in *Damned Roads*. Her degradation takes place in an orgiastic scene on a train journey.

She loses all of her previous beauty and sex appeal. We see an older woman who is drunk, obscene and merely disgusting, no longer an object of desire. Now Karol may re-locate his sexual desire towards a “proper” femininity. Significantly, Wajda, like Petelski in *Damned Road*, changes the novel on which the script was based. In Reymont’s novel it is one of Karol’s male friends, who is responsible for his downfall, whereas in Wajda’s film it is Lucy, the femme fatale, who is to be blamed for this. In this, the sanctity of homosocial bonds is once again saved as an unspoken but firm linchpin of Polish national ideology.

To conclude, examples of the presence of a vernacular type of femme fatale in Polish Cinema demonstrate that first of all she serves as a figure of the Other, threatening an otherwise secure world of a Polish patriarchal and national fantasy. She may represent an “ideological enemy” as in socialist realist films, or destroy the homosocial bonds in Polish versions of the “buddy film” as represented in *Damned Roads*, or she may endanger the “Polish family,” such a crucial element in a defensive Polish national discourse. At the same time, even if rare, her presence and her sexuality, shows that Polish cinema can provide a male viewer with an unusual anti-Polish “visual pleasure.” In Wajda’s film she plays an even more important role since, through her presence, the male protagonist can achieve his psychosexual adulthood. Otherwise, the countless images of Polish Mothers and virgins populating Polish films render the male protagonists as tragic and helpless images of masculinity, of sons of the Motherland whose role is to be ready to sacrifice their lives on its altar.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 For detailed analysis of Krystyna Janda's stardom see: Elżbieta Ostrowska, “Krystyna Janda: The Contradictions of Polish Stardom,” 2006.
- 2 For detailed analysis of the representations of women in socialist realist cinema see the chapter “Polish ‘Superwoman’: a Liberation or Victimization?” in Ewa Mazierska and Elżbieta Ostrowska.
- 3 I owe this analogy to John Orr.