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Socialist Content, Hollywood Form: Crime Films and Musicals in the Polish Cinema of the 1960s

In the early 1960s in the Polish cinema, under a new cultural policy, the genre cinema was restored to favour. Comedies, crime films, musicals, and combat films began to appear. Certainly, the initiatives taken by filmmakers themselves as well as the recognition of the audience's needs contributed to it, but, first of all, it happened due to administrative actions influenced by propaganda and ideological factors. This is evidenced by the following postulate included in the infamous *Resolution of the Central Committee Secretariat on Cinema* of June 1960.

In parallel with films ideologically committed, entertainment films, comedies and dramas should be produced in order to satisfy the interests of the most mass audience, but free of primitivism and bad taste. As regards their meaning, however, films of this kind should not lack social commitment in the spirit of socialism¹.

This postulate returned repeatedly. In 1967, among the tasks assigned to the Polish cinema there was also "taking care of the high artistic level of comedies, action and adventure films, and especially of huge shows"². Even Władysław Gomułka, that is the most important person in the state, addressed himself to

¹ *Uchwała Sekretariatu KC w sprawie kinematografii*, [in:] *Syndrom konformizmu? Kino polskie lat sześćdziesiątych*, ed. Tadeusz Miczka, co-ed. Alina Madej, Katowice 1994, s. 31.

² *Zadania kinematografii w świetle wskazań VIII Plenum PZPR, Kongresu Kultury Polskiej, Sejmowej Komisji Kultury i Sztuki, kolegiów resortowych oraz środowiskowych narad twórczych*, [in:] *Zadania kinematografii w świetle ustaleń Kongresu Kultury Polskiej, Sejmowej Komisji Kultury i Sztuki oraz VIII Plenum KC PZPR. Propozycje, informacje, 1967*, Archiwum Akt Nowych, zespół Naczelny Zarząd Kinematografii, Biuro Organizacyjne, sygn. 1/55, f. 3.

this. In 1963, at the 13th Session of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, during which ideological struggle was the most important issue discussed, he stated:

Our cinema cannot be a tool used only for experiments and cannot be adapted to sophisticated interests of narrow artistic circles, but it has first of all to meet the entertainment and cultural needs of millions of working people. It is to perform responsible ideological and educational roles (Gomułka, 1968, p. 539).

The nature of these statements leaves no doubt that the popular cinema was meant first of all to fulfil educational, ideological, and political tasks. Not without significance were also economic issues. The point was to produce films that would bring economic profits, at least they were intended to do so. The authorities were aware that society needs and expects entertainment, and the latter was not useless. Its major task was to promote socialist ideals, virtues, life styles, etc., into which the genre cinema should persuade through both the form and the content.

Therefore, it was stressed that entertainment cinema is needful and may be valuable. Yet, it was also stressed how easy it is to fall into bad taste³. The latter may in part be a result of – as politicians and publicists were saying – references to the Western mass culture among other things.

Władysław Gomułka treated the Western world with suspicion and never understood it. The Western mass culture that he considered in general terms and did not know at all was seen by him as a threat to socialism, Polish national culture, and to formation of the young generation. He spoke about artists that some of them:

Forgetting [...] about these social duties, forgetting their own nation and its needs, [...] look only at the West, there looking for artistic inspiration. This wish to catch up with Paris or New York, these snobbish attempts to keep up with various art movements, that appeared in the West and soon disappeared, would be funny if they had not entailed concrete ideological, cultural, and moral damages (Gomułka, 1968, p. 541).

However, both part of the Party's authorities and ideologists and researchers began to understand that it was impossible to ignore cultural transformations. In the 1960s, there appeared the concept of socialist mass culture (Krasucki, 2010).

³ *Konferencja w Jabłonie po XIII plenum (17.XI. 63) Referat i inne materiały*, Archiwum Filмотeki Narodowej, sygn. A-208, item. 10, f. 15-16, 24.

The idea was to create works that would rival the best foreign productions, but they would be 'our own', better, and served both to entertain and to legitimise the regime.

The works to be produced were to be set in the Polish reality, to be valuable, ambitious, to possess didactic qualities, to present the society in a true way – understood in the ideological sense –, but at the same time to provide good entertainment. Such was to be the Polish genre cinema, being on a par with – or even exceeding – the Western one in terms of quality and popularity, but set in the Polish reality⁴.

Despite all objections and concerns related to the quality and impact of Western mass culture, it is easy to see numerous references and allusions to American films in the Polish popular cinema in the 1960s. They are sometimes a sort of quotations, other times they are attempts to transfer features of selected genres. Few own traditions, a wish to communicate with the audience, an opportunity to come in contact with the West, even if in a pretended way, or a reference to models, despite them being known, all this encouraged filmmakers to reach for the models from abroad. Yet, these were not to be used without any changes, the Hollywood form had to be filled with the socialist content. Here, however, dissonances appeared, which is clearly visible in musicals and crime films.

I concentrate on these two genres, because they were set in the contemporary times (except *Morderca zostawia ślad* aka 'The Murderer Leaves a Clue' by Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski, 1967), but American inspirations are visible also in films referring to stories about the 'Wild West' taking place at the end of World War II or immediately after. Polish artists themselves willingly described their films as westerns⁵. This genre was also pointed to by critics, although they most frequently stressed a specific combination of the plot and the scenery resembling Wild West landscapes (Ozimek, 1961, p. 5). In contrast to Spaghetti Western or German films on Winnetou, the Polish cinema did not try to produce the images of twentieth-century America, but it transferred elements taken from westerns into the Polish reality. They most frequently used, like in musicals or crime films, secondary elements, without taking into account the specificity of genres resulting from ideology or their cultural determinants.

According to Wiktor Woroszyński, who was, nota bene, the author of the literary prototype and the co-scriptwriter of the film *I ty zostaniesz Indianinem* aka 'And You Will Become an Indian' intended for children, all the attempts made to produce a Polish western, especially such as *Rancho Texas* (1958) by Wadim

⁴ Gomułka was convinced, although almost completely groundlessly, that the young people would choose well written or made Polish books, films and songs, being closer to their everyday experiences (Krasucki, 2012, p. 65-66).

⁵ Bohdan Poręba said that about *Drozdze na Zachód* (Smoleń-Wasilewska, 1960, p. 2), and Zbigniew Kuźmiński about *Milczące ślady* (Oleksiewicz, 1960, p. 46). An Interview with Jerzy Hoffman and Edward Skórczewski about *Prawo i pięść* was titled *Polska „Gwiazda szeryfa”*, clearly referring in this way to the Polish title *The Tin Star* by Anthony Mann from 1957 (Oleksiewicz, 1964, p. 6-7).

Berestowski or *Zerwany most* aka 'The Lost Bridge' (1962) by Jerzy Passendorfer, in no way referred to the essence of the genre, that is a tragic story centred on the morality of a non-conformist fighting for his beliefs (Woroszyński, 1963, p. 12-13). Probably already several years later, after the experiences of the American western of the 1960s, the author could not have treated this genre in this way and would have been likely to search for its essence somewhere else. These considerations led him to the conviction, however, that the Polish western would only be possible when its fundamental story was transferred into the realities of the Polish town or those of the factory. The fight must be – he added – victorious so that according to the genre's rules satisfaction could be given to the audience. The final part of this text, the call for making films set in the Polish reality, showing the successful transformations in mentality and customs, were in accord with expectations included in the 'Resolution of the Central Committee's Secretariat on Cinema' that had been issued three years before. The point was not, therefore, to adapt the motives and rules of the Hollywood genre cinema, but to change discourse: the American morality should be replaced with the socialist one.

On the one hand, Woroszyński wrote about potential transference of the American genre into the Polish realities, on the other – he clearly showed difficulties related to it. He made these remarks also in relation to the crime film in its English version, paying attention to its belonging to British society and their perception of law. Because law, property, customs are respected, their violation is treated as a threat to the existing order. The punishment of the crime is therefore the restoration of this order. According to Woroszyński, such an attitude in Poland, where "concepts of legalism and property are still fluid" (Woroszyński, 1963, p. 13), is impossible. Therefore, in Poland there are no crime films which refer to the English tradition – which is not treated by the author uncritically – in a deeper way than the acquisition of selected, in fact superficial elements. Also other critics paid attention to the fact that not only did the patterns of the plot or characters disagree with the Polish realities, but it was also the case with the ideological base of the western crime film that was set in different social, political, economic or cultural contexts. And this is the source from which the different scales of crimes, law systems, procedures, social structures or customs originated. As Zygmunt Kałużyński wrote:

The crime film is a great poem – one can say, a national genre – of capitalism, and only at its background does it pulse fully. Its nerve is money on which everything depends: success, power, and also the total completion of fate (Kałużyński, 1985, p. 272-273).

The authors of crime films drew both on the tradition of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie and on the models and rules of the American film noir. This was perfectly noticed by the then critics. This first trope was noticed for example in the series *Kapitan Sowa na tropie* aka 'Captain Sowa on the Trail' (1965)

by Stanisław Bareja, whose characters were compared with The Saint or Sherlock Holmes, however, mainly to show the latter ones as paragons, or in the film *Gdzie jest trzeci król* aka 'Where is the Third King?', made by Ryszard Ber a year later. These films tried to combine the deduction of the solutions od secrets with the Militia officers' hard work.

Other models seemed even to disagree more with both the reality of PRL and the objectives of cultural policy. *Dotknięcie nocy* aka 'The Touch of the Night' (1961) by Stanisław Bareja through its title seems to have referred to *Touch of Evil* (1958) by Orson Welles, and actually it would be possible to see an attempt to create something similar to the film noir in Bareja's film. *Dotknięcie nocy* was a failure, which resulted from, among other things, wrong casting, bad directing, unmatched soundtrack or a small town scenery not fitting the crime film. The question is however, whether it had a chance at all to become a Polish crime film noir? The problems concerning style resulted in a considerable degree from different determinants and historical and cultural contexts. In the film made in Poland in the 1960s, neither one could speak about the dark vision of the world or social distrust nor the border between good and wrong could be fluid.

Actually, the same case was with the more interesting *Tylko umarły odpowie* aka 'Only the Dead Can Answer' (1969) by Sylwester Chęciński. Like *Dotknięcie nocy*, it brings to mind the American crime film noir, however, the attempt was more successful. The solution of the criminal puzzle becomes of secondary importance, maybe even the logic fails a little. What matters is the mood of the film, and first of all its major character, Captain Paweł Wójcik (excellently played by Ryszard Filipiński), resembling film noir characters (Wajda, 2005, s. 100-101). Although justice is regarded as an absolute value, and not as a part of a criminal code, it leads the hero to deeds that disagree with the rules, however, these deeds constitute his protest against crime.

He sacrifices everything to catch the murderer, and he pays with his life for the betrayal of the values attributed to the law officers. This good-bad Militia officer resembles more the characters of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett than officers from the Militia novels promoting positive images of law officers. However, while Wójcik is an ambiguous hero, the world in which he lives and works is more orderly and less complicated than in the film noir. As in *Dotknięcie nocy*, the evil is done by an individual, it does not result from the condition of society⁶.

Also the musical cinema referred to ideology differently from the American cinema. So as the popular cinema was to – in its own way – participate in building up socialism, the music should do the same. An example can be the role assigned to jazz in the cinema. Since the latter half of the 1950s, it served to show the young generation as a group characterised by "separate preferences and own

⁶ Here I have used parts of my text *Międzynarodowe inspiracje i konteksty polskiego filmu kryminalnego*, [in:] *Kino polskie jako kino transnarodowe*, ed. Sebastian Jagielski, Magdalena Podsiadło [in print].

customs” (Sowińska, 2006, p. 195-196). Of course, it was not the only function of jazz, it could serve for instance as a musical equivalent of a film structure. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, musical features used to be separated from emotions and ideas that accompanied them. Associated rather with privacy and improvisation, jazz was used also in films that presented positive heroes who fully accepted the system imposing the order and dominance of public sphere on them. Examples given by Iwona Sowińska are *Szklana góra* aka ‘The Glass Mountain’(1960) by Paweł Komorowski and *Mam tu swój dom* aka ‘Here is My Home’ (1963) by Julian Dziedzina, whose soundtracks were composed by Krzysztof Komeda (Sowińska, 2006, p. 180).

In the 1960s, there appeared a number of real musical films: *Mocne uderzenie* aka ‘The Big Beat’ (1966) by Jerzy Passendorfer, *Zona dla Australijczyka* aka ‘Wife for an Australian’(1963), *Matżeństwo z rozsądku* aka ‘The Marriage of Convenience’ (1966), and *Przygoda z piosenką* aka ‘Adventure with a Song’ (1968) by Stanisław Bareja, *Kochajmy syrenki* aka ‘Let’s Love the Sirens Love Your Car’ (1966) by Jan Rutkiewicz or *Milion za Laurę* aka ‘A Million for Laura’ by Hieronim Przybył produced in 1971. The elements of this genre can be also noticed in a very popular comedy TV series *Wojna domowa* aka ‘War at Home’ (1965-1966) by Jerzy Gruza. Actually, in each of them one can find references, although in varying degrees, to American musicals. In *Zona dla Australijczyka* choreography similar to Busby Berkeley’s arabesques was used. In turn, in *Przygoda z piosenką* one can see dancing on the ceiling, which resembles Fred Astaire in *Royal Wedding* (1951) by Stanley Donen (Klejsa, 2007, p. 81), and the song *Szkoda, że niepogoda* or ‘What a pity, it’s raining’ one has to associate, although mainly because of rain, with Gene Kelly performing *Singin’ in the Rain* (Skotarczak, 2004, p. 155; Otto, 2011, p. 80). *Mocne uderzenie*, already when being produced, was said to resemble *West Side Story* (1961) by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins (Garbień, 1966, p. 6). References to it can be also found in *Matżeństwo z rozsądku* (what is interesting, *West Side Story* was released in Poland in 1973). It is worthwhile noting, however, that the first tropes lead us to the musicals of the previous decades, to the days of carefree fun in troubleless America, while in the tropes leading to *West Side Story* one finds no ferocity and realism of the original and the dynamics of choreography.

In the middle of the 1960s, big beat begun to play a dominant role. The name, that was introduced by Franciszek Walicki, was initially to provide a familiar term, being dissociated from Western-sounding rock and roll. However, it became a synonym of pop youth music, not only of rock music, presenting the music and lyrics most often completely devoid of the signs of resistance. The authorities’ attitude to big beat was ambivalent. On the one hand it could be accepted as something not impairing the existing order of things. On the other hand, it would be difficult to recognise it as the realisation of the socialist ideal of culture since it aroused undesirable longing for the better world and evoked associations with the West.

Big beat joined the collection of material and immaterial objects of desire, with which the entertainment films of that decade became filled: with cabriolets, suites in luxury hotels, no less luxurious women, Paris, stripteases (started at least) and the like pleasures (Sowińska, 2006, p. 212).

Iwona Sowińska shows a certain paradox: the music, that should be characterised by rebellion, occurs together with other objects of consumer desire (Sowińska, 2006, p. 212). But the then music cinema concentrated on consumption, not on effort. To a certain degree it resulted from its compensatory and therapeutic functions. Besides, as Piotr Fortuna writes, “the spectacularity of the musical caused that the mere film image could have become an imitation of western life style, a Polish poor substitute for Hollywood cinematographic power” (Fortuna, 2015, p. 126). However, considering ideology, production system, traditions of the genre and entertainment industry, as well as actors’ professional preparation – only imitation and poor substitute.

Fortuna, with regard to Robert Altman’s works, notices that “the American musical expresses the contradiction between the need for entertainment and the Puritan ethic of work” (Fortuna, 2015, p. 121). Fun is paid for with hard and persistent labour. In Polish films, not only from the 1960s, there is no such tension, consequently it is not a constitutive element of the plot, neither does it become the source of an ideological message (Fortuna, 2015, p. 124). One does not need to work to make a stage career. Kuba, a hero of *Mocne uderzenie*, cannot play the guitar or sing, but being under the influence of alcohol and drugs, he performs on stage on which he is for the first time in his life, his behaviour is grotesque, but he is successful among the enthusiastic audience.

We therefore encounter the criticism of both performers and listeners of the youth ‘American style’ music. There is also a clear mockery of mindless imitation of American models. Not without reason the hero wears a Western-sounding nickname – Johny (Johnny) Tomala, and the composer plays a beautiful melody that just came to his mind, but we can hear *Colonel Bogey March*, commonly associated with the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) by David Lean. The world we see is false. It is a phantasm that must disappear just as the dancers do at some point. False and fictitious is also the hero himself who in fact does not exist. On the screen, one does not watch Tomala but Kuba who pretends to be him because of male-female affairs.

Mocne uderzenie explicitly shows that the influence of the Western music is irrelevant. It is true that both it and its Polish version are popular among young people. However, this proves only their immaturity and lack of musical sophistication (Otto, 2011, p. 74). Reassessments related to inspirations from the West eventually turn out to be illusory, they do not violate both the socialist and national paradigms. The hero throws off a guitar and a wig as the symbols of false identity and chooses love and stability

Therefore, *Mocne uderzenie* is also a film that is cracked, making use of the popularity of the then performers like Skaldowie or Niebiesko-czarni, and in some sense pretending to be an American film, especially with regard to scenes of dances, and also clearly mocking the quality of big beat as such and negatively assessing the then youth culture, including their desires and phantasms. The announcer announcing subsequent songs relates them with propaganda slogans concerning both general political matters, and also for instance agriculture. But in this ironic part, the words “the song has the authorities’ support” sound quite serious. The seeming ridiculing of these statements is not actually a part of rebellion but that of a farcical style, whereas Militia officers sitting in the audience clearly indicate the authority’s supervision over the youth culture, by no means being spontaneous. Therefore, although there is at least one scene with dances in *Mocne uderzenie*, which clearly points to inspiration by West Side Story, however, the message of this film as a text about and for the young people differs radically from the American musical.

It is obvious that the genre cinema draws upon checked models, and references to previous films is something that is a characteristic feature of this genre. On the other hand, the genres are determined culturally. Even if the transfer of the model or structure of the Hollywood cinema was seemingly possible, although one can be dubious about that, as regards meanings, contexts and functions, this could not be successful, however. The Hollywood form not only had to be subject to the socialist content, but also it frequently turned out to be a dummy. This was well recognized by the then critics who pointed to the impossibility of the transfer, which resulted from the genre’s inherent features formed in the capitalist culture of the West. The problem of the different political, social, and cultural realities manifested itself on several levels, ranging from purely methodological and production issues to ideology and the genre’s contexts.

Contrary to complaints on the part of critics or policy makers, at least several Polish crime films and musicals enjoyed considerable popularity (e.g. *Mocne uderzenie* or *Matżeństwo z rozsądku*), anyhow, expenditures were refunded greatly. Therefore, one can acknowledge the fact that these films met needs of the audience. They provided entertainment, constituted a bridge to the Western world to some extent, satisfied a sense of national pride, proving that the Poles were able to produce a crime film, musical and western or even a great spectacle. However, these genres had to, first of all, satisfy the needs and expectations of the authorities. The models of the Western popular culture were used to legitimise the regime. The films made that way did not describe and did not explain social processes and cultural practices. The reference to the Hollywood cinema seemed in some sense to weaken the effect of propaganda, however, the fact that it was set in such different social and cultural realities only heightened dissonance between the symbolic world and the real one, which is perfectly visible in crime films and musicals.

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Socialist Content, Hollywood Form: Crime Films and Musicals in the Polish Cinema of the 1960s

The 1960s saw the revival of genre films in the Polish cinema. These productions were supposed to combine mass entertainment with the legitimization of the communist system. The paper will analyse the use of the Western cultural imports and genre films in the Polish film industry and their application to social norms and national specificities.