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Sexuality, Feminism and Polish Cinema in Maria Kornatowska's *Eros i film*

In 1986, film critic Maria Kornatowska has published the book *Eros i film* [*Eros and Film*], proposing an analysis of cinema – above all Polish cinema – through a feminist and psychoanalytic lens. She opened her inquiry by stating that “A wave of sex has reached us” (Kornatowska, 1986, p.7), referring to the situation in Poland, as well as her experience during her trip around the United States. This somewhat ironic observation proves that the author is sensitive to cultural phenomena and suggests that she has the theoretical and critical tools necessary to analyze them. Her skills in this regard are confirmed by her next observation: that while said wave of sex has arrived with a certain delay, and is a bit late, it nonetheless forces us to take note of the aftermath of a sexual revolution that has “transpired, mainly in mass media and language” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 8). However, in Kornatowska’s opinion, the fact that Polish literature, press, and cinema have started openly writing and talking about gender and sexuality has not made these issues simpler. On the contrary – it only complicated them. Freedom of expression has laid bare people’s lack of familiarity with the theory and vernacular of, among others, psychoanalysis and feminism – tools that would allow one to understand and interpret the problem. As a film critic, she followed international cinematic offerings and the latest trends in film studies, which is why she decided to fill this gap and share her knowledge and ideas on the relationship between *Eros and Film*.

At the beginning of her book Kornatowska sketches the broad social and cultural context of contestation movements and the events of 1968. As she underscores, it was then that radical changes in the attitudes towards masculinity and femininity took place, resulting in the “blurring of gender polarization, and sexual minorities starting to demand equal rights” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 8), as well as an “emergence of a new self-awareness” in women (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 9). She notes, however, that although cinema immediately reacted to these phenomena, eagerly taking advantage of a newfound sexual liberty, it remained quite ambivalent in talking about love and eroticism, constantly balancing “on the dialectic tightrope of fear and desire, repression and longing” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 9).

Kornatowska studies the results of this balancing act in the subsequent chapters of her book, analyzing the approach of Polish and foreign filmmakers to the body, sexuality, gender identity, eroticism, the question of violence and death. She puts a particular emphasis on the “highly controversial and ambiguous question of attitudes towards femininity” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 9) and all expressions and forms of misogyny in films, particularly those from her era. She mines domestic productions for nearly textbook examples for feminist approaches. The synthetic title *Eros and Film* reflects neither the number of topics addressed in the book, nor the original approach of the author who stressed that she wanted to write about the “ambiguity, and above all the polysemous nature of cinema” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 11). Towards that end, her interpretations draw on psychoanalytical (Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Karen Horney), anthropological (Margaret Mead), philosophical (Georges Bataille), and feminist (Caroline Sheldon, Molly Haskell) concepts. She uses these diverse repositories of thought to create a multi-faceted lens, which she then uses to perform a subjective, critical analysis of films that either interested or annoyed her, motivating her to formulate her own interpretations. In her approach, Kornatowska resembles Patricia Mellencamp, who in her book on cinematic feminism has combined elements of her own biography and cinematic experience with elements of film theory and analysis (Mellencamp, 1995). Aside from that, Kornatowska also seems to represent the approach characterized by Mellencamp in the introduction to her book: “...feminism comes on many versions (...) – it never was a uniform position, popular only with crusty academics and angry women. (...) Feminism notices that women were, and are, here, in representation, in audience, in life” (Mellencamp, 1995, p. XIII).

Spectacle, Voyeurism, and the “Pleasure of Watching”

As should be expected of a critical take on eroticism in film, *Eros and Film* opens with a chapter on voyeurism in which Kornatowska analyses how “the eye of the camera preys on authentic or imagined reality” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 12) in order to allow the curious viewer to spy on other people’s lives with impunity. Following in the footsteps of Laura Mulvey who performed a critical analysis of visual pleasure in Hollywood films (Mulvey, 1975), Kornatowska also begins with a classic example, studying the character of the cinematic voyeur from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954). Her unique contribution to Mulvey’s approach is that the Polish film critic tries to also analyze auteur films in terms of voyeurism, arguing that the camera in the hands of the protagonist of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow Up* (1966) plays a similar, compensatory role. She sees this film as a diagnosis of contemporary culture dominated by the use of “visual substitutes” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 15) resulting from the way its male protagonists are constructed, particularly from their fear of sex and relationships with women. In her opinion, the personal drama of the photographer from *Blow Up* is actually the result of his inability to break through the “barrier of voyeurism” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 15) and to authentically participate in the life of a woman without separating himself from her with a camera.

In her musings, Mulvey combined the questions of visual pleasure with the objectifying effect of the camera, which transforms women into sexual objects for the male gaze. Kornatowska also follows that line of thought, once again opening with the classic example of Charles Vidor’s *Gilda* (1946). In her analysis of the scene in which Rita Hayworth “with perverse skill” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 17) removes her long glove, she notices the so-called «third presence» seeping into the intimate sphere of the characters” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 17) which is a fusion of the audience’s imagination and the camera. Interestingly, in her analysis of film fetishes of sexual nature, she does not reference feminist scholars. Instead, she draws upon Bataille’s claim that the most intense source of eroticism is transgression, the breaking of bans and limitations and – which is key to cinema – games of imagination. This is the source of the perversion of the “sexually charged” dinner scene in Tony Richardson’s *Tom Jones* (1963) during which the mutually attracted couple “bites into chicken legs with highly ambiguous ferocity” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 18).

Kornatowska finds similar, though much less subtle examples of eroticism – and therefore also voyeurism and fetishizing – in Polish cinema which in the

1980s experienced “a sudden explosion of nudity and sex” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 18). Almost as if, given the repressions of the martial law period, filmmakers took particular joy in the fact that at least in terms of eroticism “almost everything was permitted. The social realist chastity belt had been ripped to shreds, its remains discarded on the trash heap of history” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 19). The author considers the film *Thais* (1983), set in early Christian Alexandria, and the combination of crime and passion in *Magiczne ognie* (*Magic Fires*, 1983) by Janusz Kidawa to be the most spectacular examples of breaking with Polish cinema’s heretofore puritanical values. Meanwhile, Juliusz Machulski’s *Seksmisja* (*Sexmission*, 1983), which she includes for completism’s sake, is seen above all as an expression of “misogyny of the first order” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 55).

However, Kornatowska sees certain potential in Zbigniew Rebzda’s *Przyspieszenie* (*Speeding Up*, 1984) which she acknowledges touches on interesting topics (misogyny and an obsession with femininity, the inability to establish relationships based on partnership) and delivers diverse female characters. Although in the construction of the female protagonists, she sees above all the results of the simplistic view that “the dominance of women in society goes hand in hand with the decline of a male system of values” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 21), aside from the stereotypical female types: warm and caring (played by Beata Tyszkiewicz) and cold and imperious (Hanna Stankówna and Anna Romantowska), she also singles out another incarnation, which is more difficult to characterize. It is represented by the protagonist’s lover (played by Grażyna Szapołowska) who is somewhat disconnected from the main plot, “a little absent, (...) focused on herself, hungry (...) for admiring looks” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 21). Kornatowska associates the peculiar narcissism of this character, her need to be watched, with the work of the camera, which constantly follows the attractive woman, recording her movements and facial expressions. Although it seems that it is an argument for seeing the camera as a tool of objectification, in the critic’s opinion this way of filming sets this character apart from the others. She also considers the film’s love scene to be originally shot and calls it one of the best in Polish cinema, as it doesn’t offer any gratuitous nudity and is “devoid of descriptiveness and genre coloring, unreal and yet very carnal at the same time” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 22).

In Kornatowska’s opinion, the fact that several films such as *Przyspieszenie* were made in the 1980s does change the fact that Polish cinema had a rather thoughtless attitude towards eroticism which “was usually not an issue for the protagonists or the filmmakers” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 23).

Of Passions and the Obsession of Sexuality

In her analyses, Kornatowska notes that passionate dramas and erotic adventures are just one side of cinema's ambivalent attitude towards love and sex. Even the most enticing film is also guilty of "insidious moralizing" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 24), a spectacular example of which she finds in Marek Nowicki's *Widziadło* (*The Phantom*, 1983). The relationship between both sexes never strays from the beaten path of demonic or docile women driven mad with love, patiently waiting for some gesture from a man, who in this case plays "his favorite role of the lord and master of creation, Guido from the «harem» scene of *8 1/2*" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 24). Despite the profusion of erotic scenes, sex means only evil and danger, and there is constant talk of punishment for sinful behavior, which Kornatowska sees as the most "insidious part of the story" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 25). That is why, in her interpretation of *Widziadło*, she uses the psychoanalytical perspective, which allows her to see the picture as more of a "study of impotence" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 26) and drama of inability.

After analyzing Nowicki's single film about the lack of fulfillment and sexual obsessions, Kornatowska moves on to sketching a panorama of contemporary cinema which she views through the lens of Fromm's reflection on the inability to love as a defining problem of the era (Fromm, 1956), and Horney's thought on the compulsive need for emotions as a feature of the neurotic disposition of our times (Horney, 1950). She finds the problems described by these psychoanalysts in the works of Luis Buñuel – presented in a favorable light – in which "the perverse culture of a pathological society creates dark, unavailable objects of desire" (Kornatowska, 1986, pp. 33–34). In the portraits of "boyish" Italian masculinity by Federico Fellini, who in an astute and often caricatural way captured "that eternal infantilism, that eroticism laced with fear and at the same time desire for the forbidden fruit" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 41). And in the works of Eric Rohmer, whose characters are filled with fear of "diving into the roiling waters of life" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 49). To support her argument, the author quotes a work on Rohmer by the American feminist film critic Joan Mellen, with which she must have been very familiar, as she quotes it in *Eros and Film* a number of times (Mellen, 1974). According to Mellen, the French director's vision betrays a conviction that people burdened with their past "have lost the ability to freely engage with the opportunities offered (...) by life" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 49).

Kornatowska sees this line of thought as important and interesting enough to follow it during her analysis of Polish films that feature the motif of memories and a return to the past. This approach allows her to see in Tomasz Żygadło's *Odwet* (*Revenge*, 1982) a story of men who are focused on the past and succumb

to an all-encompassing feeling of impotence and lack of fulfillment. Disillusioned and hopeless, they turn to alcohol or sex, which becomes “grotesque, disgusting, devoid of warmth, feeling, intimacy” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 28). The critic sees *Revenge* as a film about powerlessness and “impotence as an existential drama” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 29) and traces it back to Polish romantic literature – “after all, *Dziady*, *Kordian* and *Wesele* are stories of individual and collective powerlessness” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 29). She sees equally potent feelings of disillusionment, disappointment, powerlessness and inertia in the work of Tadeusz Konwicki, who in his *Zaduski* (*All Hallows Eve*, 1961) showed people who were mentally and emotionally crippled by traumatic war events and could not find a way to be with each other in the present day.

Fromm supplies Kornatowska with yet another interpretation, one suggesting that the protagonists of *Zaduski* represent people who – rather than experiencing actual feelings in the present – prefer an “abstracted love” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 50) limited to the sphere of fantasy or memories. The critic finds a similarly “abstract” attitude towards reality in the films of Wojciech Jerzy Has which deal with good-byes, separations, and escapes that render all human connections unfulfilling. The reason for this, in her opinion, is that the protagonists have retreated inward and don’t see a reason to form new bonds. She analyzes them through a Horneyan lens, writing about their “neurotic attitude, their mental and emotional immaturity” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 51).

Eroticism For Our Times

Kornatowska repeatedly refers to theories from the realm of psychoanalysis, seeing them as an essential tool for describing eroticism, which in Polish cinema has an “air of frustration and hostility rather than closeness” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 51). In her analysis she draws on Horney to offer a diagnosis of Polish cinema and life in the 1970s and 1980s, and sees them as a bad time for private passions and focusing on emotions and psychology, because “people’s hearts and minds are occupied by issues of collective, public welfare. The country is in crisis” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 53). Barbara Pietkiewicz had a similar observation when in her reportage published in “Polityka” magazine, and quoted by Kornatowska, she claimed that people don’t have time for romance, as they are “busy with their carpets, black coffee, and phraseological dictionaries” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 53).

In Kornatowska’s opinion, it is this feeling of being overwhelmed by everyday tedium that dictated how relations between the sexes were portrayed in the Cinema of Moral Anxiety in which “the secondary nature and subservience of erotic

and emotional relationships is (...) particularly evident” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 53). Film characters are chasing after apartments and children because they give them a sense of stability, and are marks of status, but there are always more important issues, such as their careers, and “the wealth of sensual and emotional sensations has no «constructive» value” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 54). In Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Amator* (*Camera Buff*, 1979), the protagonist’s wife leaves him which, in Kornatowska’s opinion, only confirms her observation that in Polish reality, relationships between men and women were not built on firm foundations, but resulted from social conventions or pragmatic considerations. Even in Kieślowski’s *Przypadek* (*Blind Chance*, 1981), in which erotic elements are more pronounced, she sees this schematic narrative dominating over psychological truth, and notes a supremacy of social determinations over individual choices. She concludes that in a cinema crippled by moral anxiety “sex, eroticism and love are only meaningful and useful as visual attractions and fodder for ideological debates” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 55).

As a counterpoint, Kornatowska introduces the emotional life and problems of the protagonists of Alan Pakula’s *Klute* (1971) which she sees as evidence of the director’s intimate knowledge of people, his era, and “the longings and anxieties of the soul” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 57). This fragment of the book shows that the author studied both Polish and American contemporary culture with equal attention to detail, trying to problematize cinematic images in the spirit of the era and contemporary – at least in the American context – theoretical thought.

To be a Man, to be a Woman in a Different Way

Kornatowska repeatedly underscores the social context in which the films she analyzes were made, namely one in which traditional gender roles and narratives were being rejected. Hence, she devotes quite a lot of time to the motif of the reinterpretation of sexual identities, documenting the radical changes she has observed: “As we see, a time of turmoil has come. Traditional attitudes and stereotypes are being overthrown, though not without resistance and general confusion” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 86). This also applies to heterosexual models of identity, particularly since, as the author underlines, “homosexuality by definition stokes rebellion towards social norms and rules” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 96), which she probably was able to observe in the United States. In her reading of homosexuality, which was several years ahead of queer thought, there is no performative component; the dominant thread is that of exclusion and condemnation for breaking with normative models. That is why in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s films, she finds mainly conflicts built around the divide “between ideology

and passion, between affirmation of the physicality and concreteness of life and a neurotic sense of guilt, a deep fear of violence and destruction” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 96). The only break from this poetics she sees in *Flower of the Arabian Nights* (1974), which to her is a “magical, lush apotheosis of «the liberated world of pure impulses and primal instincts»” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 96), as described by the British film critic Robin Wood, whom she quotes.

In order to soften the opposition between film protagonists’ hetero- and homosexual attitudes, Kornatowska introduces an additional category which she defines as a “parahomosexual point of view” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 99). This perspective is prominent in the tradition of war stories, whose protagonists can display their “ability to be good fighters and good friends” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 99). She offers the example of Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978) which to her is a portrait of a real emotional bond between men, based on common experiences, and born “on a hunt, at war, in an atmosphere of dangerous adventure and mortal danger” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 99). Kornatowska’s argument predates Steve Neale’s analysis of masculinity as a spectacle in which he claimed that all suggestions of homoeroticism were masked in classical cinema, sometimes as duels, fights, and acts of violence (Neal, 1993).

Kornatowska also finds examples of “cinema laced with homosexuality” in westerns, in which even more than in *The Deer Hunter* it is evident that women are not party to the male community, “their province is that of everyday experiences, banal, diluted emotions” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 99). As she astutely notes, although the most important things, “combat and loyalty” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 99) take place among men, women appear in these relationships as a third element and, interestingly, one that “doesn’t drive the men apart, but in a way brings them together, giving a concrete dimension to those male fascinations” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 100). For the author, the most striking example of this dynamic is George Roy Hill’s *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* (1969) which shows male friendship as a product of attraction and repulsion, concord and conflict. Meanwhile, the character of Etta (Katharine Ross) plays the role of a “sexual connector” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 100) between her impulsive and insecure lover Kid (Robert Redford) and the more mature Butch (Paul Newsman).

In Kornatowska’s “parahomosexual” interpretation, Etta attracts both men, and thus “embodies (...) their mutual desire which they are mostly unable to consciously accept. It’s a mechanism of transference. (...) The desire for another man is being transferred to a woman” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 101). Kornatowska finds the same mechanism in Roman Polański’s *Nóż w wodzie* (*Knife in the Water*, 1960) in which she sees the protagonists being motivated to act by their

incessant need to compete and fight for dominance, but also to seduce the other man and gain his attention. In a game played by men with vastly different experiences and social status, the woman is “a pawn and a medium” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 101), necessary both as a prize and an audience.

Another Polish film she references in this context is Filip Bajon’s *Limuzyna Daimler-Benz* (*Daimler-Benz Limousine*, 1981), which in her opinion contains traces of the same approach to history and gender identity as Luchino Visconti’s *The Damned* (1969) and Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* (1969). Both directors “connect fascism with sexual deviations, particularly homosexuality, as signs of the degeneration of the bourgeoisie” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 121), showing the development of nationalism against the collapse of culture and social norms. In Bajon’s film, the tense atmosphere of the interwar period is reflected in a relationship of “strength and weakness” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 125) between two brothers who coldly manipulate each other. Their sexuality is merely one aspect of the film in which the author sees a study of “the slow decline of the wonderful bourgeoisie world, in which intellectual neurosis, in a curious paradox, seeks to remedy its suffering and anxiety through a cult of strength, mass, and order” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 126).

Following cultural changes, Kornatowska also finds – although far fewer – examples to illustrate lesbian relationships, which she sees as a sign of strong social disapproval for female homosexuality. She draws on a description of the phenomenon from Mellen’s text, and then concludes that “cinema usually portrays lesbians as physically and mentally sub-standard, unfulfilled in their femininity, frustrated” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 148). Sheldon (Sheldon, 1988, pp. 5–26) presents a slightly different approach in her essay, in which Kornatowska finds the opinion that “lesbian films are made for a clearly broad audience (...) They satisfy voyeuristic longings while simultaneously warning women against forsaking their safe, heterosexual nests” (Kornatowska, 1986, pp. 148–149).

Mindful of these observations, Kornatowska analyzes the Károly Makk’s *Another Way* (1982), seeing in it “a study of love between two women who are diametrically different in terms of appearance, temperament, personality, who follow entirely different walks of life and fate” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 142). Éva (Jadwiga Jankowska-Cieślak) is a professed lesbian, independent but entangled in a passion that consumes her, while Lívia (Grażyna Szapołowska) is a married woman who wants a child – but it is she who makes erotic overtures first, even though she is constantly anxious about social ostracism. In Kornatowska’s interpretation, the relationship between the two women cannot be a fulfilled one, as Lívia’s monotonous and boring existence “creates complex systems of ration-

alizations and escapes. Éva's otherness is in this context both a temptation and a hazard" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 144).

Their mutual fascination is also hindered by outside factors, as they both function "in a world of men consumed with social, creative, and political activity, (...) who treat women instrumentally, like objects" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 144). Meanwhile, the two lovers want to focus on each other and their passion, which is why their relationship is consummated outside the city, in natural surroundings. Kornatowska points out the emotional nature of the love scene, which is almost explosive – "it's almost an euphoric explosion, a catharsis that cleanses both protagonists of the grime and bitterness of their previous lives" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 145). Its expressiveness leads her to claim that the director's intention was to create an alternative to an unpalatable reality in which men have lost their ability to love and be loved. In effect, *Another Way* shows that "the world of men is a world of artificially created ideas, conflict, dominance, enslavement, destruction (...). Only in a world of women can there be freedom" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 147).

In Kornatowska's opinion, it is exactly these unfavorable circumstances, but also the awareness of one's freedom of choice, that cause "a woman to turn to another woman. She discovers her. And finds fulfillment through her" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 153). Sofia Scandurra talks about it in *I Belong to Me* (1977), based on a novel by "the standard bearer of militant feminism, Dacia Mariani" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 153). The film's protagonist, an exemplary wife and mother, only starts realizing she is dissatisfied with her life, in which the myth of the wonderful Italian male lover proved to be false, when she encounters and starts romancing a rebellious lesbian. Kornatowska finds a similar motif in Diana Kurys's film *At First Sight* (1983) about married women who meet each other through their children and discover the meaning of friendship and closeness. The nature of the relationship between the protagonists of Margarethe von Trotta's *Sheer Madness* (1982) is different, as it unfolds violently and passionately, "in keeping with the rules of the game of love, teeming with dramatic conflicts, break ups and reunions, with the aim of completely dominating the other being" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 154). At the same time, their friendship is the only thing of authentic value both women have, it allows them to satisfy their desires.

Kornatowska sums up films about lesbian relationships by saying that they are a testament to shifts in awareness and ways of thinking, "they manifest attitudes and convictions that had recently been considered shocking" (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 155). At the same time, she underscores that many of these films were directed by women, which makes them "actually female movies, made by wom-

en for a female audience” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 155). In her opinion, much like Antonioni once studied the “crisis of emotions” in cinema, female directors were now showing “a deep dissatisfaction with their fate, (...) a dogged and chaotic search for new roads towards fulfillment in life” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 155).

Polish “Women’s Cinema”

In Poland, “Women’s Cinema” is represented in Kornatowska’s opinion by Barbara Sass, although she skeptically and rightfully notes that “it is a very unusual and ambiguous cinema. Torn between the ambitious desire to discuss «women’s issues» and male stereotypical thinking which the author can’t quite shake off” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 158). Hence, in *Bez miłości* (*Without Love*, 1980), *Debiutantka* (*Debutante*, 1981) and *Krzyk* (*The Scream*, 1982), we get a sense of both “simple, naïve moralizing” and a particular need of “compensation, taking revenge on men for various slights and experiences” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 158). In her analysis of *Bez miłości* she points out the fact that the film’s protagonist tries to get ahead in life by being as ruthless and cruel as men. And even though Kornatowska agrees with the film’s message that “evil doesn’t pay – you can’t live without love, even if it’s just love for your fellow man” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 158), she firmly objects to the director’s arguments. With critical passion, she states: “If we had a feminist movement [in Poland], the author would probably be asked why a woman who wants to live independently and strives to advance her career has to act like a gangster, and one peddling their own body at that. *Bez miłości*, a film made by a woman, is therefore also misogynistic.” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 158).

Debiutantka starring Dorota Stalińska as Ewa, who represents a decidedly male attitude towards life, fares a little better in Kornatowska’s opinion. In her contacts with Jerzy (Andrzej Łapicki) the young architect, unlike the women who live with him, establishes herself as a partner – “she tries to impress him with her zest for work, her courage and mental maturity, which are characteristics not traditionally perceived as feminine” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 159). In Kornatowska’s opinion, the structural weakness of female characters in Sass’s film stems from the fact that they reflect the conviction – still pervasive in Polish consciousness – that “a woman’s value is defined by a man, and finding one is in a sense the goal of her life” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 161). So even if Ewa offers the architect’s wife and companion “female friendship and solidarity in the name of true independence”, they still “prefer the presence of a male myth to the reality of female loneliness” (p. 159). The critic notes that she found Ewa’s motivation difficult to understand “unless we assume that there are in *Debiutantka* unarticulated and – perhaps – not entirely conscious lesbian inclinations, masked,

camouflaged, but peeking through in the dramaturgic logic, ‘between images’, in the subtext” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 161).

Kornatowska also names two other Polish film in the context of relationships between women, seeing in them the symptoms of a local sexual revolution whose advent has “released also lesbian love from the shackles of shameful silence” (p. 162). The first one is Henryk Schoen’s *Wir* (*Whirlpool*, 1983) in which the erotic relationship between Anna (Marzena Trybała) and Róża (Ewa Dałkowska) takes place in stylish Art Nouveau décor, with “the modernist entourage lending itself (...) to obsessive infatuations, perversions and sensuality” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 162). The second, extremely disparate example is Wiesław Saniewski’s *Nadzór* (*Custody*, 1983) which takes place in a female prison, where lesbian relationships are formed in the context of isolation and confinement. However, as Kornatowska notes, in neither of these films does the topic of love between women lend itself to a dramatic arc or create any substantial conflict. It is not part of the main plot, but rather serves an ornamental role: “Above all, it is a sign of the liberalization of cinematic norms, or growing sensitivity to global fashions” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 162).

Kornatowska concludes her musings on gender identity on screen by analyzing the issue of bisexuality and androgyny. She references the thought of Margaret Mead who claims that femininity and masculinity are products of society and culture, which means that individuals have to submit to traditional models of gender roles, and the moment they reject them, they are sentenced to “the tragedy of eternal dissatisfaction” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 164). Kornatowska finds an example of this identity conflict in the “dramatic transfiguration of a forgotten Young Poland poet, Maria Komornicka, who one day decided, irrevocably, to be a man and adopted the name Piotr Włast in her life and work” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 165). Knowing the anthropological and feminist context allows her to notice in Komornicka’s transformation the result of mechanisms of maladjustment and exclusion: “The madness of a woman who rises above the average and is conscious of her superiority, but was shaped by and lived in a backwater, in an era when misfits had to pay a particularly steep price” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 165).

Maria Kornatowska’s book *Eros i film* is a collection of original analyses of films and at the same time a presentation of the methodology she developed as she systematically acquainted herself with feminist, psychoanalytical and anthropological thought. The interpretations proposed by the author are also a record of the intellectual fascinations that blossomed as she visited the United States, devoting herself to personal studies and academic pursuits. She would

return from her voyages bearing the latest academic news, familiarized with the latest publications and productions, ready to share that knowledge through her articles. The structure of *Eros i film* shows that she was particularly inspired by publications on women and gender identity. In her introduction, she even states that “the feminist movement is one of the most important and momentous events of the second half of the 20th century” (Kornatowska, 1986, p. 9).

Interestingly, another book on feminist thought was published in Poland in the 1980s, and was also the result of a trip to America. It was a collection of translations of canonical critical texts titled *Nikt nie rodzi się kobietą* [*No One Is Born a Woman*, 1982], edited by Teresa Hołówka. Having spent some time at an American university, the author decided to introduce the ideas of, among others, Margaret Mead – before her work was published in Poland – Kate Millet, Sherry B. Ortner, and Lynda M. Glennon to Polish readers. The opening of the publishing market in the 1990s meant that the books and articles quoted by Maria Kornatowska were finally translated into Polish. But given that *The Female Eunuch* – the 1970 American bestseller – by Germaine Greer, quoted by Kornatowska, was only first published in Poland in 2001, it’s easy to see the groundbreaking and illuminating nature of the modestly published *Eros i film*.

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Abstract

The text addresses the issue of feminist film criticism in Poland in the 1980s, represented by the book by Maria Kornatowska *Eros i film* [*Eros and Film*, 1986]. In her analysis Kornatowska focused mostly on Polish cinema, examined through a feminist and psychoanalytic lens. As a film critic, she followed international cinematic offerings and the latest trends in film studies, which is why she decided to fill the gap in Polish writings on gender and sexuality in cinema, and share her knowledge and ideas on the relationship between Eros and Film. The purpose of the text on Kornatowska's book was to present her individual interpretations of the approach of Polish and foreign filmmakers to the body, sexuality, gender identity, eroticism, the question of violence and death. Secondly, it was important to emphasize her skills and creative potential as a film critic who was able to use many diverse repositories of thought (including feminist theories, philosophy and anthropology) to create a multi-faceted lens, which she then uses to perform a subjective, critical analysis of selected films.

Key words: Film criticism; feminism; sexuality; identity; gender