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A Brief Examination of Some Trends in Polish Comedy Films Since 2005

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As Andrew Stott mentions in his overview of comedy: “As a dramatic form, the historical development of comedy appears to confirm the idea of a relatively permeable form adapting to suit the demands of the day”.[1] When considering contemporary trends in Polish comedy it is impossible to avoid some acknowledgement of the manner in which the genre has adapted to the post-1989 realities of the country. During this period the State socialist system has been dismantled, meaning that the organizations that had the sole responsibility for the funding and distribution of Polish film have disappeared. They have been replaced by a panoply of private production and distribution companies and government supported funding mechanisms. A less censoriously monitored film production environment has emerged, but, particularly through to the formation of the Polish Film Institute (PISF) in 2005, this has come at the cost of far more treacherous financial climate for film production.

It is perhaps partly as a response to these seismic shifts in the film production landscape that Polish cinema has seen something of a renaissance in the comedy genre, particularly romantic comedies, since the end of the 1990s. Romantic comedies have frequently proved the biggest box-office draws domestically among the 60-80 Polish films produced and distributed annually. With the ending of State monitoring and censorship of film content Polish comedy films have sought to engage with far more graphic and sexually provocative material. Although this has seemingly come at the expense of quality political satire, which was a mainstay of comedies during the State socialist period. The comedy genre has also been one of the main areas in Polish film where the unidirectional influence of the sudden influx of Hollywood film product post-1989 can be most clearly observed. Hollywood comedies are frequently viewed as the acceptable templates and formats for modern Polish comedy, whilst Polish comedy films suffer the fate of so many European comedy films, an inability to travel successively beyond their national borders,

or regional borders. This article seeks to give a brief introduction to contemporary Polish comedy film and attempts to isolate some of the significant trends that have emerged within the genre since 2005. In so doing it will suggest where the genre's unheralded strengths may lie and what are some of the major issues that affect its wider recognition.

A Short History of Polish Film Comedy

Taking a longer view there are at least three distinct periods of Polish comedy cinema. The first dates from the late 1920s and reaches its peak in the mid-1930s. This type of Polish comedy was a form of light comedy that had at least superficial, literary pretensions, and featured elements of both slapstick and vaudeville. The undisputed star of this mode of pre-war comic cinema was an unassuming figure called Adolf Dymsza (1900 – 1975), who was described in Ford & Hammond's history of Polish film as "the most important comic actor in Polish cinema".[2] Dymsza often worked with the director Michal Waszyński (1904 – 1965), and one of their films, *ABC miłości* (1935), was recently presented in a restored print at the 39th Gdynia Film Festival, demonstrating the degree of esteem and affection with which these films are still held in Poland today. This era of cinema production in Poland essentially ended with the commencement of WWII.

After the war Poland's film industry basically began from scratch under a State socialist system that, at least initially, was broadly in line with the modes of production of Soviet Russian film of this period, i.e. heavily influenced by Stalin's desire for a 'social realist' aesthetic, as laid out most effectively in the work of Andrei Zhdanov (1896 – 1948). To begin with these conditions were not particularly fertile for the growth of new Polish comedies, but by the mid-1950s a new style of comedy had begun to emerge that was superficially 'correct', but that contained a vast array of subtexts and allusions that were often pointedly critical of authority and state institutions. An early example of this type of Polish comedy would be Tadeusz Chmielewski's farcical take on cops and robbers *Ewa chce spać* (1958).

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, whilst Polish cinema was making an impact internationally for its epic dramas, such as *Faraon* (1966), or biting political critiques, such as *Człowiek z marmuru* (1977), some of the most successful and best loved domestic films were comedies, notably films such as *Rejs* (1970), *Miś* (1981) and *Seksmisja* (1984). This divergence between the idea of Polish cinema on the international stage – increasingly focused upon politically engaged drama – and the idea of Polish cinema domestically points to a major issue with the genre as a whole, namely that the nature of its construction prescribes a specificity that frequently impacts upon how such films might travel. Returning to Stott momentarily, comedy films

> emerge from within the social framework and necessarily express the nature of their environment, which means that all jokes are necessarily produced in a relative relationship to the dominant structures of understanding and the epistemological order.[3]

Unlike in straight dramatic offerings or genre films such as horrors, in which a degree of universality can be applied to even the most niche of narrative subjects simply by focusing upon recognizable human relationships and fears, comedy is much more particular and peculiar. There are obviously some examples that demonstrate a communicable universal element within certain types of comedy film, culture clash comedies, romantic comedies and slapstick being among them. However, the Polish comedy cinema of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s is so laden with specific references to the realities of living under a State socialist political system, that it takes a leap into the realm of science fiction for a degree of international accessibility to become apparent. *Seksmisja*, a broad satirical comedy set in a future world populated solely by women, found modest success during a limited theatrical release in the US, but very few other Polish comedies of the period replicated this.

An obvious part of the problem is to do with the manner in which popular film genres inevitably play outside of popular cinema distribution networks once they are taken out of their domestic marketplaces. Whereas Hollywood film product will play in multiple territories as an industry leader, European cinema, and particularly that coming out of the former Communist countries of the pre-1989 period, is often restricted to the 'art-house' and festival circuit outside of its domestic marketplace. These are not the ideal distribution conditions for 'populist' and genuinely popular comedies to thrive, which might also go some way to explaining why it is rare for such films to stray too far beyond their domestic borders.

Post-1989 Polish comedy cinema enters a third phase, one marked by the prominent impact of Hollywood cinema as a blueprint for Polish comedy films, as well as by the diminution of political and satirical comedy – something that would once more seem obvious after the collapse of political authoritarianism. During this period there is also far more promiscuous use of genre, creating hybrid forms, such as the action-comedy most clearly illustrated by the Cezary Pazura vehicle *Kiler* (1997). This genre promiscuity ultimately leads to the kind of complex 'mash-up' films that will be mentioned toward the end of this article. The dominance of the private sector upon film industry funding mechanisms, as well as the role played by national and cable television broadcasters (TVN, TVP and Canal+, among them), also creates a different array of financial imperatives, that has led to the search for successful trends or franchises, such as the *Lejdis* (2008) / *Testosteron* (2007) series. The involvement of television also has an effect upon the aesthetics of a whole sub-genre of comedy, namely the romantic comedy, which has become

increasingly modeled upon the most popular Polish soap operas, or international sitcom hits. Comedy films have also become the perfect genre platform to dabble in forms of lifestyle advertising, where the rapid changes in consumer culture within post-1989 Poland are utilized increasingly to package and sell a particular idea of successful cosmopolitan urban life. The following overview will briefly examine each of these recent trends with reference to an exemplar film.

Polish Romantic Comedy, a Formula for Success

After the 1990s obsession with gritty gangster satires (*Psy*) and parodic action-comedies (*Kiler*) that saw the likes of Cezary Pazura rise to prominence and a 1980s icon like Bogusław Linda (1952 –)[4] redefine himself as a tough guy, Polish comedy cinema began to mine a rather fertile seam of gentler and more whimsical romantic movies. These films have been rarely seen outside of Poland except through specialist Polish festival and distribution networks, such as Kinoteka in the UK. Even then key specialist foreign distribution companies, like Piotr Grześkiewicz's Project London Productions, have tended to veer away from the comedy genres in favour of popular dramatic fare such as *Jesteś bogiem* (2012).[5] Undoubtedly part of this is to do with the way in which such distribution networks operate abroad, with there being a seeming disconnect between a popular film form and its exhibition in niche interest 'arthouse' spaces. This is something that Project London Productions' distribution partnership with the Cineworld chain in the UK should have remedied, but as yet there has still been a preference shown for films with dramatic heft and an awards reputation.

It is within the romantic comedy genre that recent Polish cinema has found a significant degree of domestic box-office success. Like almost all European nations, the Polish annual box-office receipts[6] are dominated by Hollywood product. Since 2005 around five Polish films, on average, have featured in the annual box-office top twenty within the domestic marketplace.[7] Sixteen films that could be described as romantic comedies have featured on annual box-office top twenties since 2005. The only other genre that can come close to this degree of box-office success domestically during the same period is that of the Polish historical drama.[8] Thus romantic comedy has proven to be a truly popular genre within contemporary Polish film. A large proportion of these highly successful films have received generally negative reviews from the Polish film press, yet this has not stopped them performing well at the box-office.[9]

A key figure within the genre is the Polish comedy star Piotr Adamczyk. Since playing Chopin in *Chopin. Pragnienie miłości* (2002) Adamczyk has been considered a romantic leading man within Polish film. From 2007, however, he has become more closely associated with the comedy genres in general and,

from 2008, the romantic comedy genre in particular. Twice in the last decade Adamczyk has starred in the top two most successful films in the annual Polish box-office charts.[10] Adamczyk illustrates one general strategy employed by Polish producers of romantic comedies, namely audience identification with a popular actor within a certain genre. Much as Bogusław Linda was a decade-defining 'tough guy' figure in the Polish cinema of the 1990s, Adamczyk has come to define the lighter, more comic (although frequently painfully chauvinistic) Polish cinema of the 2000s.

Aside from the use of an identifiable 'star' name the Polish romantic comedy of the 2000s has tended toward the formulaic, clearly taking its cues from recognizable Hollywood archetypes (the odd couple relationship, the last-minute change of heart, the wish-fulfillment narrative). This would come as no surprise if filmmakers within the genre had grown up in the early 1990s, at a time when US Hollywood product would have been saturating Polish cinemas. However, very few of the directors within the genre are under the age of fifty. Recent efforts to promote new filmmaking talent by the PISF hasn't had much traction within the more commercial environs of the Polish film industry, where older male directors traditionally exert most influence. It might be this collision of old-fashioned film directors with imported formulaic tropes that give a number of Polish romantic comedies their strangely contorted quality of what can only be described as modern traditionalism. Although generally set in a glitzy, promiscuous modern world of smartphone-obsessed, go-getting executives, who all seem to live in ultra-chic minimalist bachelor(ette) pads in Warsaw, the films simultaneously tend to be informed by a quiet Catholicism that idealizes duty, faithfulness, modesty and traditional family values. The chauvinistic elements of the films can also be traced back to a rather conservative sense of patriarchy, in which women invariably sacrifice something to win over a supremely egoistic man.

One film that is the very epitome of this romantic comedy variant is Ryszard Zatorski's cloying ode to traditional Polish family values *Tylko mnie kochaj* (2006). Zatorski had initially started directing films in the awkward political period between the implementation of Martial law in1981 and the collapse of the State socialist system in 1989. In the economic difficulties that beset the film industry during the 1990s Zatorski drifted into the relative security of television, working on two different romantic drama series (the immensely popular and long-running hospital drama *Na dobre i na złe* and the equally long-running family saga *M jak miłość*), both of which were patterned upon popular American soap-opera formats. After this period in television Zatorski returned to filmmaking, only this time within the emerging romantic comedy genre. His 2004 film *Nigdy w życiu!* (exclamation marks are a common feature in Zatorski's film titles), was an adaptation of an immensely popular work of Polish 'chick-lit' by Katarzyna Grochola.

As a result of being based on a bestselling novel the film already had a built-in

audience, and it was no surprise when it became one of the biggest box-office successes of the year. The book upon which the film was based bore more than a passing resemblance to the highly successful British novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*, in which a woman in her thirties takes control of her life after separating from her long-term partner. The seemingly conflicted themes of female empowerment and romantic true love that were present in this British antecedent, were ideally suited to a modern female Polish readership, as they appealed both to the consumerist culture of 21st century Polish society and traditional romantic notions of love, that in Polish terms have frequently been bound up in expressions of Catholic faith. The film was financially backed by the commercial television station TVN, one of the major national television broadcasters in Poland, who promoted the film heavily across their various programs. The film's success helped Zatorski to establish a formula for the Polish romantic comedy genre that continued to be the template most frequently utilized throughout the 2000s.

Central to this formula was the merging together of a traditional idea of romantic love, strongly connected to Poland's Catholic heritage (a strong male heroic figure to whom a woman devotes herself, the primary importance of the family, female martyrdom), with a sense of the liberating potential of the new capitalist consumerist society that Poland had embraced post-1989.

Part of the allure of the Polish romantic comedy genre in the 2000s was its capacity to imbue cinematic escapism with the tantalizing consumerist notion of the perfect makeover. Just as the Polish Socialist state was being remade as a free market fantasia, the Polish citizen was being reconfigured as a site for dutiful consumer-spending and self-improvement through purchasing. However, Zatorski's next film *Tylko mnie kochaj* is the film in which Polish romantic comedy truly distinguishes itself from US romantic comedy, as the struggle between tradition and modernity is foregrounded in the sentimentalized relationship between twice-over lovers Michał and Julia.

Tylko mnie kochaj also demonstrated one other key facet of Polish romantic comedy during the 2000s, namely the role played by television companies in shaping a star's profile. Traditionally Polish acting talent emerged out of either stage theatrical training (similar to Britain in this regard), or the specialist film training of the film schools, like Łódż and Warszawa. From the 1990s onwards television increasingly served as an apprenticeship for actors who would go on to become significant Polish film stars . The character of Michał in *Tylko mnie kochaj*, was played by the attractive young star of two successful TVP soaps (*Plebania* and *Na dobre i na złe*, the latter of which Zatorski had worked upon as a director) Maciej Zakościelny. Zatorski and TVN attempted to cash in on Zakościelny's clean-cut good looks by building two major romantic comedy productions around him. The first of these was the hugely successful *Tylko mnie kochaj*, whilst the second was *Dlazcego nie!*, which was released the following year. The latter film also performed relatively well at the box office,

but critical reaction seemed to suggest this was in spite of Zakościelny's questionable charms, rather than as a result of them. What is striking is that despite this actor having featured as a romantic lead in two successive popular rom-coms, since 2008 he has essentially been returned to the safer environs of the small screen where his comic deficiencies are less apparent. Such attempts at star manufacturing would be comparable to a pronounced trend in US film and television relationships, where stars of hit sitcoms such as Ted Danson (*Cheers*) or Jennifer Aniston (*Friends*) struggle to replicate their small-screen appeal, despite often being given tailor-made vehicles and the full support of the promotional arms of major media corporations.

If Zatorski and Adamczyk have come to represent key constituents of a formulaic post-2000 template for the romantic comedy subgenre within Polish comedy films, then Mitja Okorn's *Listy do M.* (2011) smashed this template to smithereens. It was the domestic box-office success story of 2011, setting domestic box-office records and receiving widespread critical acclaim. In the same way that Zatorski's *Nigdy w życiu!* was seen as an example of the Polish film industry parroting popular mainstream trends from the Anglophone US/UK sphere (i.e. *Bridget Jones's Diary*), *Listy do M.* has been lazily compared to another British made rom-com that had massive Hollywood-backed distribution, namely *Love Actually* (2003). There are indeed obvious similarities, as both films are set during the Christmas period and both feature a multi-strand narrative involving a large ensemble cast. However, whereas Richard Curtis's script for *Love Actually* remains strictly within the confines of his particularly successful brand of middle-class British romantic fantasy and whimsy[11], *Listy do M.* manages to make a romantic comedy that quietly embraces the peculiarities of the post-1989 Polish reality, as much as it looks to emulate and mimic the mawkish sentimentality of a certain strand of Hollywood romantic comedy.

Listy do M. also proves to be a remarkably modern example of the ways in which the Polish film industry has become an increasingly diverse national film industry in recent years. Despite containing echoes of heavyweight prestige Polish filmmakers like Kieślowski (a director who it can be argued has had a greater impact upon filmmaking trends internationally than domestically[12]) and demonstrating an awareness of Polish society that steps outside of the wish-fulfillment consumerist fantasies of *Tylko mnie kochaj* and its ilk, the film was directed by a young Slovenian filmmaker and co-scripted by a US actor/director, Sam Akina. In an interview with Noah Charney, which was published in *Film International*, director Mitja Okorn talked about how he arrived in the Polish film industry. Intriguingly Okorn specifically mentions the reputation of Polish cinema internationally, whilst referencing the film work of previous generations that broadly fit within the prestige culture of the 'art-house' and international film festival circuits:

> this is the homeland of Roman Polanski, Andrzej Wajda, Kieslowski… Poland is a country with a film tradition that Slovenia can only dream about. They make 80 films per year here, and more than 100 TV series. Poland is heaven for film-makers.[13]

These reflections upon the Polish film industry, as much as they focus on a prestigious past, also highlight its contemporary strengths, particularly in relation to film industries from smaller and/or newer European nations, such as Okorn's Slovenia.

Okorn had come to Poland as a result of some concerted networking on the international film circuit. Having made an independent feature in Slovenia his show reel had impressed an influential Polish television producer, Justyna Pawlak, who gave him the opportunity to direct a new TVN television sitcom called *39 i pół* (2008-2009). The relative success of this show enabled Okorn to persuade TVN to give him a feature opportunity. As with Maciej Zakościelny and Ryszard Zatorski in the 2000s, the TV series that Okorn had worked on had a recognizable and popular performer attached to it, Tomasz Karolak. As part of the production package for *Listy do M.* Karolak was given a leading part, showcasing his self-consciously arrogant charm in the role of the vain heartthrob Melchior. TVN also backed Okorn with a prestige cast, in domestic terms, that included Roma Gąsiorowska, Piotr Adamczyk and Maciej Stuhr (son of Polish cinema and theater legend Jerzy Stuhr).

The involvement of Sam Akina on the project was as a result of Okorn's previous work with the screenwriter on an as yet unfilmed feature called *The Member*. This was meant to be Okorn's second feature film, but the funding arrangements for it in Slovenia fell through, leading, in part, to his move into the Polish film industry. Okorn established a good working relationship with Akina upon *The Member*, with Akina helping to bring an outsider's perspective to the Slovenian history of the script. This outsider's perspective was Akina's "own, fresh and non-manipulated view on the whole thing, which meant that he only used the most important facts of that history – the facts that were telling the story".[14] It is perhaps this writing relationship that is particularly responsible for the ease with which *Listy do M.* moves between seemingly universalized genre elements, the paraphernalia of Polish religious traditions surrounding Christmas and the nuanced realities of modern Polish society. The inference here is that coming from outside of the culture that the film is being made in has actually enabled Okorn and Akina to resist systemic pressures to pursue a certain model of genre film. Having an American scriptwriting partner on board perhaps also contributed to an avoidance of some of the awkwardly alien elements inserted into many other Polish romantic comedies of the period. This awkward insertion of alien elements primarily involved utilizing American genre models, but with a tone-deaf ear for how those could be successfully integrated with Polish societal realities.

The impact that *Listy do M.* had upon the Polish romantic comedy film can best be assessed through the gradual decline in audience figures for the kind of deliberately calibrated and ineptly executed rom-com from the 2000s – straining to wed together a mechanical replication of Hollywood with a flawed perception of modern Poland. In the aftermath of *Listy do M.* romantic comedies have had to aim for a higher standard to continue to attract the large audiences that came to even poor quality rom-coms in the 2000s. Supporting this thesis that *Listy do M.* raised the quality requirements for the genre is the example of Tomasz Szafranski's supernatural rom-com *Od pełni do pełni* (2012). This film followed the template of a director being given an opportunity to direct a rom-com feature after some success helming a popular Polish soap opera, in this case *Samo Życie* (2002 –). One of the female stars of this series, Katarzyna Glinka, was then recruited as one of the romantic leads for *Od pełni do pełni*, alongside another familiar face from television series, Andrzej Nejman. This poorly conceived attempt at cashing in on the growing international appeal of fantasy fiction and young adult romance fiction, also featured Polish television veterans, such as Jerzy Bonczak, and attempted to incorporate Polish 'punk' music as part of its youthful appeal.

The film was originally developed for production in 2009, however, it was only able to acquire completion funding (1.5 million zł) from Kino Polska in 2011. As a result the film wasn't released on the Polish domestic market until 2012, just as the craze for supernatural fantasy was beginning to wane. It also suffered dreadfully by comparison with a film like *Listy do M.*, seeming immediately outdated upon its very release. Prior to 2012 this film would have been broadly in line with the tried and tested template for Polish romantic comedies of the 2000s. However, in the post-*Listy do M.* environment it stood out as a film belonging to another era and lacking the qualities that had been so successfully introduced in Okorn's crowd-pleaser. As a result it sank without a trace.

Problematizing What's Funny – The Distorting Mirrors of Konecki and Smarzowski

Since 2012 Piotr Adamczyk has continued to draw an audience to Polish comedy, but even he has had to do so in vehicles that favor a grittier or cruder engagement with social realities than the romantic comedies of the previous decade. *Wkręceni* (2014) reteamed Adamczyk with his preferred director Piotr Wereśniak and proved to be one of the most successful films of the year at the box-office. This film also demonstrates the influences of other forms of Polish comedy film, beyond the romantic comedy genre, particularly the deliberately politically incorrect, 'sensational' comedies of Tomasz Konecki – *Testosteron* (2007) and *Lejdis* (2008) – and the jet-black, gritty trawls through corruption and nostalgia that are Wojciech Smarzowski's comic-dramas, such as *Wesele* (2004) and *Dom zły* (2009). Konecki's films were box office sensations in

Poland and have an era-defining quality similar to a film like *Seksmisja*. Whereas Smarzowski's work initially played to a much smaller audience, before an action-thriller like *Drogówka* made him a recognized box-office presence, as well as an auteurist figure.

Konecki's films use ensemble casts and incorporate hysterical elements of filthy, sexually explicit comedy, alongside broad farce and slapstick. In many ways they stand as an exact mirror image of the Polish romantic comedy genre, being all too aware of the superficiality of consumer culture and completely oblivious to the kind of traditional moralisms underpinning much of the Polish rom-com fare. *Testosteron* and *Lejdis* run as companion pieces. The former paints an exaggerated and slightly grotesque image of Warsaw men as they fool around and discuss their sexual conquests whilst trying to rescue a disastrous wedding ceremony. The latter looks at a group of Warsaw 'ladies' all of whom seek revenge for some kind of wrong they've experienced at the hands of a male figure in their lives. Both films are bawdy, foul-mouthed romps, littered with physical slapstick and abrasive chauvinism. They are also indisputably concerned with everyday Polish realities amidst the general excesses and pratfalls of their comic antics. Essentially they are premised upon that old comedy stalwart of the battle of the sexes, and they take absolute glee in their own vulgarity.

The very existence of both films makes another trend in Polish comedy cinema truly galling. This trend is the remaking of American comedies, usually within an unsuitable and poorly established Polish context. This is particularly obvious when considering the manner in which an American box-office success like *The Hangover* is needlessly remade as *Kac Wawa* (2012). That film seemed to be under the mistaken impression that the envelope-pushing that Konecki's films deal in, especially with regards to the 'acceptable' limits of mainstream Polish comedy, had never actually occurred. Konecki's work has also inspired a miniature subgenre of inferior comedies, such as *Wyjazd integracyjny* (2011), that play upon the sexual excesses and knowing political incorrectness of his films, without any of their pointed satirical edginess. *Wkręceni* also appropriates many of these 'sensational' comic elements for its own 'boys trip away' narrative, but like Konecki's originals there is a sense that these elements are tied to some degree of social commentary.

In the case of Wojciech Smarzowski, and his influence upon Polish comedy, the effects have been more subtly felt. It may at first seem odd to talk of Smarzowski's work in the context of comedy, as his films are generally viewed as 'art-house' dramas outside of Poland, where they tend to play in competition at various international festivals. However, to fail to register the significant strands of comedy within Smarzowski's work is to completely misunderstand almost all of his films. Even his most recent grueling adaptation of Jerzy Pilch's pseudo-memoir of alcoholism *Pod mocnym aniołem* (2014) luxuriates in the colorful horrors of the condition, creating a deliberately uneasy sense of the

comic and the horrific working in tandem. Besides, Smarzowski is yet another director who should have emerged to feature prominence in the 1990s, but due to the poor health of the Polish film industry at the time, was sidetracked into television. Like many of the other filmmakers discussed in this article Smarzowski got his first significant break working on a Polish soap opera, in his case *Na wspólnej* (2003 –). Many of the ensemble of actors that have formed around his work and repeatedly appear in his films (Robert Więckiewicz, who played Walęsa in Wajda's recent biopic, Bartłomiej Topa, Arkadiusz Jakubik), have come from theatrical backgrounds via television series.

Smarzowski's first feature film *Wesele* (2004) is his most obviously comedic. Like *Testosteron* it takes a wedding as the location for much of its humor – weddings being of particular significance within Polish tradition and thus ripe for satirizing. Where Konecki and Smarzowski differ is in the object of their humor. Konecki's films are utterly contemporary, locked in to an engagement with the Polish present moment. Smarzowski on the other hand brings a strange kind of melancholic nostalgia to his comedy. The Communist past isn't so much celebrated as used as a prism through which to view modern Poland, with Smarzowski essentially showing that the corruptions and degradations of the past are still present, only less foregrounded. Many of Smarzowski's characters thus fall into a depressive longing for the days when at least you could rail against the system, with much of the humor stemming from the clashes between this disliked past and the disillusioning present.

As part of this melancholic nostalgia entrenched national stereotypes of chauvinistic chivalry, excessive alcohol consumption and martyr complexes are some of the tropes used as comic ammunition. It is particularly interesting to look at a film like *Dom zły*, which due to its overt horror aesthetics and almost impenetrable local specificity appears to be much more of a disorienting thriller than any recognizable form of comedy. Yet the Polish reception of this film generally saw it as being a grotesque black comedy. The film's use of historical vantage (it is set in the period of severe Polish political unrest at the end of the 1970s) and embedded stereotypes give it an oblique irony that would be difficult to detect for anyone who hasn't had some experience of how modern Poland has been psychologically scarred by its State socialist past.

These elements of melancholic nostalgia and black comedy surface in a diluted form in the moments of workplace camaraderie within *Wkręceni* and have been noticeably co-opted into the mainstream of comedy to smudge the glistening modern veneers of the previous decade. Since 2012 even Polish romantic comedies have become less fetishistically concerned with consumerist ideals for living (the latest technological gadgets, stylish clothing and Ikea furnished apartments, among them). They also crucially inform genre mash-ups like *Yuma* (2012) and *Rewers* (2009), two films that due to the excessive promiscuity of their genre hybridizing narratives, tended to once again fail to register outside of Poland as predominately comic exercises in nostalgia.

Rewers, in particular, received some international festival attention and enjoyed brief theatrical releases in both the UK and the US, where critics like Alissa Simon did highlight its comic sophistication. However, it is a film without the obvious populist appeal of other Polish domestic comedy hits, and with much of its humor predicated upon a reasonable knowledge of Stalinist-era Polish society. Whilst away from the mainstream they are a clear influence upon the underappreciated comedies of Hubert Gotkowski, whose low-budget films, such as *Manna* (2008) and *Bobry* (2009), have come to define a radically independent approach within Polish comedy cinema.[15]

By no means should this overview be taken as a comprehensive itemization of the various different facets that comprise the whole genre of Polish comedy. That is far too large a task to undertake in so small a piece of work. There are other trends that have revealed themselves in recent years, or are still in the process of revealing themselves. Some attention could definitely be given to the problematic issues of 'political correctness', liberalism, conservatism and anti-Semitism in Jerzy Stuhr's woeful recent satire *Obywatel* (2014). Likewise, milder forms of comedy that are frequently addressing parent-child relations could also warrant some future investigation, with films like *Mój rower* (2012) clearly managing to find the kind of older audiences that movies like *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) have successfully targeted in the UK. Finally, it would be interesting to examine what the recent trend of audiences failing to flock to the kinds of comedy that were popular only a few years before may be indicative of. Is it a growing comedic sophistication within the Polish cinema-going public? Is it a preference for other genres of cinema? Is it connected to the economic downturn that has been felt later in Poland than many other places in Europe? Or is it simply audience exhaustion with the forms of Polish comedy being frequently produced over the past decade?

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Stott (2005), p. 10.

Linda was one of the actors most prominently associated with the Polish Cinema of Moral Concern of the 1970s and 1980s, having appeared in important films of the period such as Kieślowski's "Przypadek" (1981) and Wajda's "Człowiek z żelaza" (1981).

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All box-office data mentioned in this article comes from the primary on-line box-office database Box Office Mojo (www.boxofficemojo.com).

Peak years during this period were 2007 and 2008, in which six Polish films featured in the annual top twenty. 2008 actually sees “Lejdis” and “Nie kłam kochanie” taking the top two places. More recently, in 2014 the top three films in the annual top twenty were all Polish releases, with almost half of the top twenty – nine films in total – being Polish. However, the period between 2012 and 2014 has also shown a trend away from comedy, with only three comedy films making the top twenty during this period, of which only one was a non-hybridized form. 2012 was also the worst year for domestic film product during the period 2005-2014, with only three Polish films making the annual top twenty.

Recent examples of such films would be: “Katyń” (2007), “W ciemnośći” (2012) and “Kamienie na szaniec” (2014).

For example, a film like “Och, Karol 2” (2011), which was a sequel/remake of a 1985 film and came second in the box-office top twenty of 2011, also got nominated for the least funny film award at the Polish equivalent of the Razzies, the Węży awards.

In 2008 Adamczyk starred in “Lejdis” and “Nie kłam, kochanie”, whilst in 2011 he starred in “Listy do. M” and “Och, Karol 2”. He was also the star of the only Polish comedy to feature in the 2014 top twenty – “Wkręceni”.

“Four Weddings and a Funeral” (1994) and “Notting Hill” (1999) being other successful examples of this hermetically contained, US-friendly depiction of British society.

To briefly expand upon this comment, Kieślowski is an interesting figure within Polish cinema because probably his most enduring and significant work in a Polish context is the series of television films he made that form the “Dekalog” (1989). Also, outside of Poland he is a filmmaker that appears upon many film school and academic syllabi, so that a Spanish filmmaker, such as Jaime Rosales, who was taught at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión in Cuba, is more likely to directly reference the director’s work than a young Polish filmmaker. This is in part due to the fact that Kieślowski isn’t as central to film education within Poland as figures such as Wajda and Zanussi are. It

also once more reflects that divide between the domestic and the international, with Kieślowski being much more revered on the international film festival circuits and as a result of his late Francophone films, than within Poland.

Charney, Noah, ‘Here and There: An Interview with Director Mitja Okorn’. Film International, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2014. p. 107-114 (quote from: p. 109).

Charney (2014), p. 111.

Often classified as ‘off-cinema’ in Polish accounts of industry structures, which is a category that defines a film’s production as having received no state funding or assistance.