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EDITORIAL

Editorial

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In the village of Desznica, in the hills of the Podkarpacie region in southeastern Poland, the primary school closed last September. There were no students left to fill it. The last few children had been moved to schools in nearby Nowy Żmigród and Kąty. “When a school dies, a part of our village dies away,” a local councilor said before the vote to shut it down. Until the 1990s, Poland was Europe’s demographic exception. The country was Catholic, women married early, housing was allocated, childcare was a workplace entitlement, and the cost of a second or third child was absorbed by the state.

The transformation of the 1990s pulled those support structures apart, and in different directions. Housing was privatized faster than wages could catch up, workplace nurseries closed, and higher education expanded, pushing the age at birth of the first child into the late twenties and then the early thirties. EU accession in 2004 opened the British, Irish, and German labor markets to younger Poles, many of whom had their children abroad. Within a decade following the transformation, Polish fertility had fallen below 1.5; within two it was lower than Italy’s; today it is among the lowest in the world.

Since the 1990s, Polish cinema’s interest in children’s movies has closely followed the country’s fertility rate. Using data from FilmPolski.pl and a classification algorithm on the summaries of Polish feature films, we tracked the ones aimed at kids and set it next to Poland’s fertility rate. In 1990, roughly one in sixteen Polish feature films was a children’s film. As fertility rates decreased toward 1.3 children per woman, the children’s-film share fell with it and then flattened out at around two percent for the better part of the next decade. Fewer babies, fewer films about childhood. In 2018, that pattern broke. The share of children’s films climbed fast, and since 2022 it has run well above its long-run average, back to levels not seen since the early 1990s. Meanwhile, fertility rates have continued to drop.

How can this recent flip be explained? Around 2012, the Nowe Horyzonty Association launched a development workshop called Films For Kids.Pro, bringing in tutors from Denmark, Norway, and Germany to coach Polish

producers and writers on how youth-targeted cinema was being made elsewhere in Europe. The foreign tutors, as one participant noted in a blogpost for the Polish Film Institute (PISF), "could not believe that in modern Europe, in a forty-million country, practically no films for children are being produced." The problem for filmmakers with children's and family projects was that their pitches went into the same evaluation queue as arthouse and historical scripts, where they competed on terms that did not favor them. Historical films, in particular, draw the oldest audiences of any genre, so it may come as no surprise that films about the past are among Poland's most popular. By 2016 PISF had created a dedicated priority within its Film Production operational program, "Films for the Young Viewer or Family Audience," with its own expert evaluation committee separate from the panel judging historical films.

Jerzy Moszkowicz, director of the Ale Kino! children's film festival in Poznań, said at the end of 2016 that "after years of dramatic drought, a better time is coming for Polish cinema for children and youth." A 2018 law introduced a 30% cash rebate for producers and raised the public-funding ceiling for films aimed at children under twelve to 70% of total production cost, and a year later PISF widened the young-audience priority to cover script and development work as well as production. In short, one explanation for the increase in the share of children's movies after 2018 is simply due to the changing funding policies of PISF. But why would these policies change?

Poland's government has come to treat culture itself as a fertility policy. In November 2022, the Council of Ministers adopted the Demographic Strategy 2040, a binding plan whose stated aim is to lift Polish birth rates toward the replacement level. Among its twelve official interventions, alongside housing benefits and tax breaks, is the "popularization of culture conducive to the family." Piotr Gliński, who served as Minister of Culture throughout the period when children's film funding expanded, remarked at a congress in December 2022: "the dominant trends of contemporary culture, generally speaking, are not conducive to having children."

Whether the generation raised on Polish family films will, in the near future, return the favor by having children of their own is a hypothesis no one can test yet. However, it seems unlikely that the shuttered school in Desznica will reopen because a coming-of-age film won an award at Gdynia. The likelier outcome is teenfacing. Polish cinema, having run out of actual children, will resort to casting forty-year-olds as adolescents. While the boom in children's films is the soft instrument of the Demographic Strategy, the hard one came with the Constitutional Tribunal's October 2020 ruling, which made abortion illegal in nearly all circumstances. Polish cinema would do well to start funding a few more films about middle-aged women, since they are the ones who are having abortions (often in clinics across Poland's borders with Czechia and Germany). One in fifty Polish fiction features dealt with abortion in the 1980s, one in two hundred by the 2010s, and since the ruling, we could identify but

one.

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In this month's issue, Anastasia Eleftheriou launches our coverage of the Cannes film festival with a review of Cristian Mungiu's Palme d'Or winner *Fjord*, the reception of which oddly matches its main themes. Margarita Kirilkina saw Dmytro Sukholytkyy-Sobchuk's *Silent Flood*, a documentary meditation on the place of pacifism during wartime, while Jack Page reviewed Andrius Blaževičius' *How to Divorce During the War* that parallelizes personal relationships and geopolitical conflicts. Tajana Kosor takes on *Wondrous Is the Silence of My Master*, an aesthetically ambitious historical drama by Ivan Salatić that bites off more than it can chew. Martin Kudláč situates *Promise, I'll Be Fine* by Slovak filmmaker Katarína Gramatová in the context of local social realism. Anna Batori saw *Pretty Lethal* by Vicky Jewson, an at times ridiculous B-horror film set in Hungary. Last but not least, Zoe Aiano caught Paul Negoescu's *Atlas of the Universe* at the Berlinale – a children's film that eludes the familiar "Don't go alone into the woods" didacticism.

We hope you enjoy our reads.
Konstanty Kuzma & Moritz Pfeifer
Editors