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# Ewa Mazierska

University of Central Lancashire in Preston

University of Gdańsk

Orcid: 0000-0002-4385-8264

## Documentary Films About Polish Transformation from State Socialism to Capitalism<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

This article discusses Polish documentary films made after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, till 2005. I focus on films concerning class issues, not least because the changes which happened in 1989 were as political as they were economic in their character, leading to creating a distinct class stratification: winners and losers. I examine here films made in the 1990s till the mid-2000s, as it can be argued that after this period, the transformation was completed. I focus on films concerning labour and labour relations, as this was the part of life which changed most after the fall of state socialism and affected ordinary people most profoundly, and class issues, more broadly. I am particularly interested in how the changes of the 1990s affected individual and group identities of Poles, especially identities pertaining to age, education and place of living.

### Key words:

Polish documentary cinema; political transformation; films about migration; Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an extended and revised version of a chapter from Ewa Mazierska's book entitled *Poland Daily. Economy, Work, Consumption and Social Class in Polish Cinema*, New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books 2017.

Documentary films tend to be produced faster and more cheaply than fiction films. They also give less mediated access to what ordinary people think. For these reasons, they are better equipped to convey a sense of actuality, capturing momentous changes right when they are happening. This is also true about Polish films made after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, which are the subject of this study. In this article I am focusing on films concerning labour relations and class issues more broadly, not least because the changes which happened post-1989 were as political as they were economic in nature, leading to creating a distinct class stratification: winners and losers. I examine films made in the 1990s till the mid-2000s, as it can be argued that after this period, the transformation was completed and cinema mostly lost interest in this topic. I am particularly interested in how the changes of the 1990s affected individual and group identities of Poles, especially identities pertaining to age, education and place of living.

In economic terms, the transformation I refer to here was from state socialism to the version of capitalism, known as neoliberalism. David Harvey, its leading analyst and critic, defines neoliberalism as a version of capitalism, in which accumulation of capital is achieved by

- 1) privatisation and commodification of public assets;
- 2) financialisation, so that any commodity can become an instrument of economic speculation;
- 3) management and manipulation of crises; and
- 4) state redistribution, by which wealth and income is distributed upwards, from lower to upper classes and from poorer to wealthier countries and regions (Harvey 2005, pp. 160–62).

These four features of neoliberalism reverse the principles on which Eastern European economies, including that of Poland, were built after the Second World War. Privatisation is the reverse of nationalisation of industries, which was meant to ensure that the whole of society and especially the workers, not the capitalists, own the means of production. Financialisation is a reverse of non-monetary distribution of welfare, such as communal apartments, heavily subsidised culture and childcare and rationing of shortage goods to ensure that everybody receives some of them. Management and manipulation of crises is the reverse of the principle of planning, which was meant to prevent economic and social crises. State redistribution of income from the poor to the rich is the reverse of the policy of redistribution from the rich to the poor by land reform, nationalisation of factories, capping salaries of the managers in state firms and heavy tax on private producers. The attempts at marketisation did not start in

Poland and Eastern Europe at large after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but began as early as the 1960s and gained momentum in the late 1980s. However, these attempts were patchy and slow in comparison with the torrent of changes which affected Eastern Europe from 1989 onwards. In the Polish context, neoliberalisation was in the 1990s typically described as 'restructuring': the economy needed to be restricted along the lines mentioned above, to be efficient again.

### Unemployment as a tool of identity destruction

Polish documentaries in the 1990s tackle the less attractive facets of neoliberalism, such as the pauperisation of a large chunk of Polish society, chiefly because of unemployment, which, once it came to Poland, oscillated between 10 and 15% for the entire period of the transformation. This does not mean that Polish documentary filmmakers in this period rejected the dominant pro-neoliberal ideology tout court. In most cases, in the 1990s the opposite was the case, which reflected the fact that the main purchaser of the documentaries was Polish state television, which represented the views of the ruling elites. The relatively low number of documentary films concerned with unemployment in this decade points to it not being a subject favoured by the authorities (Przylipiak 2015). Even those which were made at the time, tended to adopt a neoliberal position, rendering the unemployed responsible for their predicament. In this article, I focus on several types of documentaries: those concerned with unemployment.

One film about unemployment from this period is *This Wonderful Work* (*Ta wspaniała praca*, 1993) by Piotr Morawski. The very title harks back to the period of socialist realism, when work was officially proclaimed the most important good, also in an aesthetic sense, as something providing the worker with valuable aesthetic experience and rendering them beautiful. The film tells the story of three female textile workers from Łódź, who lost their jobs when their factory was closed down in the early 1990s. The women describe their current situation, while comparing it with their past. The past was not rosy, because their work was hard, poorly paid and damaged their health. However, they also mention the stability of their lives and the sense of camaraderie and joy derived from a job well done. All this was gone and now one woman is unemployed, one gets temporary jobs as a seamstress and the third, the 'lucky one', is a pensioner. Their stories are juxtaposed with images of the textile factory which looks like a ghost town and those connoting consumption, such as display windows with mannequins and sex shops. In one of them we see a woman performing a striptease. Eventually the sex worker tells her story and we learn that she was also a textile worker, laid off at the same time as the other women. She was accepted into the sex club, which

was not an option for the older and less attractive women. She presents herself as a winner, due to the fact that she can support herself and afford some luxuries, such as expensive clothes and cosmetics, although she mentions the moral turmoil she experienced when she had to retrain herself. The ultimate message of the film is that any work, including backbreaking physical work and sex work, is wonderful in comparison with unemployment. This would not be the case, if unemployment benefit allowed a decent life and there were no stigma attached to those who do not work. It is worth adding that in 2006 the textile factory where Morawski's heroines worked gave way to a large shopping mall called Manufacture (Manufaktura). Such a transformation became very common in postcommunist Europe, implying that production gave way to consumption. But, of course, consumption is only for those who can afford it; the lack of the opportunity to produce for many means exclusion from even basic consumption.

Another film concerned with unemployment, euphemistically termed in the 1990s 'restructuring', is Tomasz Dobrowolski's *The End of the Epoch of Coal* (*Koniec epoki węgla kamiennego*, 1993). In common with Morawski's film, its title is ironic, as it can be interpreted as either referring to an epoch in the geological history of the Earth or the role of coal in human history. The conflation of the two meanings points to the archaic mindset of Polish miners, who do not accept that their time is over. They use the past as a means to legitimise their demand for the preservation of their jobs and their ways of living, saying that 'Poland is based on coal. Our entire industry is based on coal'. Their supposed status as 'dinosaurs' is confirmed by their conviction that the plans to close down the mines is a consequence of some conspiracy, as opposed to a healthy economic calculation, which is an opinion espoused by the film's author. Again, as Przyłipiak notes, responsibility for finding a new job and adjusting to the new reality is ultimately placed on the miners, rather than the neoliberal state which inherited the supposedly unprofitable mines or their new, private owners (Przyłipiak 2015). From this perspective it is worth comparing *The End of the Epoch of Coal* with the British film *Brassed Off* (1996) by Mark Herman, which referred to a similar process, albeit taking place in Britain over twenty years before Dobrowolski's film is set. However, Herman questioned the view that British coalmines were unprofitable and that their laid-off employees should take care of their own future. The difference in the approach might reflect the context of these films; in 1996 Britain neoliberalism, especially in the version practiced by Thatcher, brought largely negative memories; in 1993 Poland it was seen as a source of hope.

Although the 1990s brought many fiction films set in the countryside, such as the acclaimed films by Jan Jakub Kolski, for example *Pograbek* (1992), *Mi-*

*raculous Place* (*Cudowne miejsce*, 1994) and *Sabre from the Commander* (*Szabla od komendanta*, 1995), they do not offer a realistic depiction of making a living from farming post-1989. Perhaps this was because, as Paul Coates argues, after 1989 the countryside in Polish cinema was relegated (or upgraded) to the position of a metaphor of Poland as backward, yet spiritual place, resisting joining 'Europe' or the 'West' on the West's terms (Coates 2008). The countryside as a place of daily struggle attracted more attention of Polish documentarists, who tackled the fate of people working in state farms (the PGRs), which after the fall of state socialism were dismantled and sold off to private owners. The best known examples of this cycle are *Fog* (*Mgła*, 1993) by Irena Kamieńska and *Arizona* (1997) by Ewa Borzęcka. *Fog* is set in an unnamed place where there used to be a PGR. The shots of what was before a functioning microcosm and now looks like a ghost town is juxtaposed with the utterances of their members, who compare the present, which for them is a time of misery, resulting from unemployment, with the communist past. One man says: 'When I had work, I had everything. Now, with no work, I'm a common beggar'.

Some try to pinpoint the reasons why they cannot get work. First, they were deprived of their means of production by being excluded from privatisation of the common land. One man says that if he gets ten hectares, a horse and a cow, he will be fine now. Others mention that on the ruins of an old PGR a cooperative farm should be created and the old workers should be its new owners and managers. This raises the question why this did not happen, suggesting that privatisation of state land in Poland was conducted according to the rule of accumulation through dispossession, as identified by Harvey. The characters also notice that as ex-farm workers, whose professional capital became obsolete, they have no chance to find employment in agriculture elsewhere. Neither did they get a chance to upgrade it by attending courses to learn foreign languages and new professional skills. On top of that, they are not eligible to get credit to set up their own businesses. All they got from the postcommunist rulers is unemployment benefit (*kuroniówka*), which is so low that they live below the poverty line, lagging behind on rent and owing money to the local grocery shop. One woman mentions that she has no money to call a doctor or buy medicine for her sick child. Kamieńska's interlocutors are not blindly nostalgic for the bygone times, listing their shortcomings, such as wasting material and human energy and undeserved privileges of those in positions of power. That said, they admit that even though the communist elites enjoyed disproportionate benefits, the crumbs from their table allowed the common people to survive. Under state socialism there was always enough work, which ensured both income and self-respect. The postcommunist regime took all of this away, bringing nothing valuable. We hear

somebody saying 'I would never have believed Wałęsa would do it to the people. If I had known it, I would not have voted for him'.

In their discussion of *Fog*, Mikołaj Jazdon and Mirosław Przyłipiak argue that the title refers to the state of mind of the inhabitants of the post-PGR village. Their minds are 'clouded' by their sense of helplessness, which prevents them from improving their lot (Jazdon 2008; Przyłipiak 2015). According to these critics, they are *homini sovietici*, locked in the past. Without rejecting this interpretation I suggest that the titular fog might also refer to an invisible calamity coming from outside, as suggested by the shots showing the village enveloped in this immaterial substance. I read the 'fog' as a barely visible, yet real means, through which the village and its inhabitants are cut off from the centre and condemned to civil and eventually material death. One example of this 'enfoggement strategy' is discontinuing the only train connecting the village with the city on the grounds that it is not profitable. The lack of transport creates an extra obstacle in finding work or selling the fruit of local labour in the city. They also mention the authorities' lack of interest, who refuse to visit such a 'shithole'.

Unlike *Fog*, whose exact setting is not revealed, *Arizona* is set in the post-PGR village Zagórki in the Słupsk region in northern Poland. Its title is taken from a cheap wine, whose drinking is the main entertainment of its inhabitants. The film paints an image of a world which has reached its end and is going through a 'slow apocalypse'. The sign is the end of profitable production and return of the inhabitants of Zagórki to some kind of natural state (which in *Fog* was at best hinted at). We learn that they poach animals living in the nearby forest and that it is easier for them to survive in summer than in winter because in summer they collect berries and mushrooms which they sell in the city of Słupsk. One of Borzęcka's interviewees admits with pride that he has enough wood for five years; this is wood which he 'gleaned' rather than bought. Deprived of paid employment, money and any chance of decent entertainment, they amuse themselves with spying on each other and drinking Arizona. As with all socially excluded people, alcohol on the one hand allows them to forget their miserable existence and reach utopia (one character admits that 'Arizona saves our lives'), but on the other hand reduces their chance to leave the vicious circle of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

The majority of people presented in the film looked after animals when they worked in the PGRs, with many milking cows. Their attachment to the animals transpires through the narrative. Some look after the few animals which survived the privatisation of the PGR, such as a pig and a horse. The horse is now over 30 years old and the owner takes him for walks, as if he was a beloved pet. An

old woman, who presents herself as an ex-prisoner of Ravensbrück, lives with numerous cats and dogs, which is her way to redeem her shameful deed of eating a dog after she left the camp (possibly out of hunger). This draws attention to the danger that the unemployed farmhands will also be reduced to eating their pets. Borzęcka also points to the fact that they are treated like animals rather than human beings by the authorities and by each other. One of the characters even compares his wife to a horse who only moves 'from here to there'. The fact that these people were used to their narrow habitat is seen as a reason why they are unable to adapt to the neoliberal world of greater mobility. Being a *homo sovieticus* precludes becoming a successful neoliberal (wo)man.

The way Borzęcka shoots her characters through the gates, augments the connection between their situation and that of caged animals. The reference to animals and life in a concentration camp brings to mind the concept of 'homo sacer', as elaborated by Giorgio Agamben. According to Agamben, 'homo sacer' has only his physical existence (*zoo* as opposed to *bio*), therefore can be killed with impunity. This condition is epitomised by the inmates of Nazi concentration camps, who were devoid of any individuality, reduced to numbers and practically dead even when they were still alive (Agamben 1998: 181–88). However, as I argued elsewhere, the condition of an unemployed or precarious worker under neoliberalism has much in common with *homo sacer* (Mazierska 2015, pp. 155–91). This is also true about the villagers of Zagórki. One factor in their 'homosacerisation' is the lack of social security, which leads to debt and their physical and social degeneration. The death in the film of two animals, the pig and the horse, who featured extensively in the film, underscores the point that the people from Zagórki are sentenced to death.

Borzęcka focuses on the here and now of her characters, as opposed to asking the question of who is responsible for the status quo. The 'authorities' or the 'system' are not visible in this film. According to Tadeusz Sobolewski (a critic regularly working for the *Wyborcza* daily, which is the main voice of neoliberalism in Poland), Borzęcka departed from the rule governing the Polish documentary cinema of the 1970s, namely that 'people are good, the system is bad' (Sobolewski 1998, p. 70). This might reflect that, paradoxically, under state socialism filmmakers had more freedom to criticise the state than under neoliberalism. The critic also suggests that the film is about a certain category of people, which is universal. He writes:

There have always been, are and will be excluded people near us who have failed, who have been left behind, who have sunk, for whom the only refuge is a bottle [of alcohol] and empty laughter... I have had such neighbours everywhere



I lived: on Woronicza Street, on Wilcza, Chłodna, Hoża. There were plenty of them in Praga, where my father came from. After watching Borzęcka's film, they paraded in front of my memory all these neighbours who we so easily – too easily – describe as 'degenerates'. We, concerned about the fate of society. (Sobolewski 1998: 70)

Of course, it is possible to see *Arizona* this way and it is especially tempting for those who, like Sobolewski, tried to merge a humanist concern for the excluded with the conviction that neoliberalism in the 1990s was the only viable political route for Poland. From such a perspective the title of the film can be interpreted as referring to the post-PGR village as a new 'wild West' which needs to be re-captured and re-civilised the 'neoliberal way'. However, on repeated viewing, one picks up signals that it is the neoliberal system which produces those who Sobolewski describes as 'degenerates'. For example, one of the characters, a wealthy incomer who apparently wanted to rejuvenate the bankrupt PGR, mentions that under state socialism the PGR had 300 cattle and 300 hectares of land which post-1989 went wild. One wonders who is responsible for this decline as surely not the workers who lament the disappearance of their livelihood. In common with the characters in Kamińska's film, one ex-worker mentions that communist times were better than now because the communists stole from the workers but also allowed the workers to steal. Nowadays, on the other hand, the rulers still steal from the workers, but the workers are not allowed to steal any more. It is difficult to find a better summary of the neoliberal condition.

*Arizona* received some important awards, such as the Grand Prix at the 1998 Kraków Film Festival and is widely regarded as one of the most important Polish films of the 1990s. But it also brought accusations that the filmmaker behaved in an immoral way by picking characters, who best illustrated her point and buying them *Arizona* so that they could better play the role of degenerated lumpenproletariat. One critic compared the reality presented by Borzęcka to that created by Pieter Bruegel (Nowak 2011, p. 47). Without diminishing this comparison, I will evoke here the concepts of 'dark tourism' (Lennon and Foley 2010) and 'ruin porn' (Millington 2013), which refer to the phenomenon of special interest granted to sites of poverty and misery, and the attempts to make money out of them. No doubt Borzęcka uses the aesthetics of 'ruin porn' through exaggerating the negative aspects of life in Zagórki. That said, these attacks on the filmmaker themselves were ideological, as they allowed to move attention away from what the film shows, to the integrity of its author.

In contrast to films about the bankrupt PGRs, *Welcome to Life!* (*Witajcie w życiu!*, 1997) by Henryk Dederko takes as his characters those who bought

into the rhetoric of capitalism, choosing, to use the well-known slogans from Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996), 'life, career and electric tin opener'. The film shows the operation of the American firm Amway which sells cleaning products and food supplements, juxtaposing fragments of the firm's own promotional material with interviews with its employees and recordings of interviews between more experienced workers and those who only recently joined the firm. Amway entered the Polish market in the early 1990s and by the time Dederko's film was made had over 80,000 employees. Amway is shortened from 'American way', suggesting that its methods epitomise the American approach to business and life. The film focuses on recruiting and training new employees, because these two processes ensure Amway's longevity and are an important source of its income, accounting for about 30 per cent of the firm's total revenue. The new recruits are asked to buy cassettes and books from which they can learn how to become successful businessmen. Rather than being taught how to sell washing powder and toilet cleaner, they are told how to recruit new people willing to sell Amway products. Ultimately, Dederko's film suggests that Amway is not selling commodities, but ideology – the ideology of capitalism (Piątek 2011). It declares that everybody can be a winner if only they put their heart into it. We hear such statements as 'We have to think what we desire and money will come automatically'. Conversely, losers choose to be losers, because 'poverty is a state of mind' and 'if we surround ourselves with poor people, we become impoverished ourselves', as the Amway gurus teach us. Such views are peddled in the promotional sessions by the most successful people in the organisation: the Americans who are high up in the firm's hierarchy, as well as some Poles who proved themselves to be outstanding workers. The former address the newcomers from the Amway tapes and travel to Poland to preach Amway *modus operandi* in training courses, which look like political rallies or religious gatherings. The latter recruit new agents trying to convince them that thanks to joining Amway all their dreams will come true.

The main idea promoted by these people is that not technology or material resources, but faith makes a successful capitalist. This is demonstrated by images of new recruits who during the Amway rally sing the Polish national anthem or lie on the floor in their apartments with headphones, listening to the 'Amway gospel' emanating from the cassettes. These people use their family relations, friendships, everything they do in their spare time to sell Amway's products. Hence the title of the film: 'welcome to life' rather than 'welcome to Amway'. By the same token, Dederko's film announces a return of the shock worker or 'new Soviet man', known from Stalinist times. As Boris Groys observes,

The slogan of the age became 'Nothing is impossible for a Bolshevik'. Any references to facts,

technical realities, or objective limits was treated as "cowardice" and "unbelief" unworthy of a true Stalinist. It was thought that willpower alone could overcome anything that the bureaucratic, formalistic eye perceived as an insurmountable obstacle.... Generations were raised on the examples of Pavka Korchagin and Mares'ev, invalids who overcame their physical infirmity through sheer willpower. (Groys 1992, p. 60)

The difference between now and then is that in the past the saying was that 'Nothing is impossible for a Bolshevik' and now 'Nothing is impossible for those embracing capitalism'. However, this claim is undermined by the statistical data presented at the end of the film. The closing titles state that 0.2% of Amway employees earn 95% of the income of the firm. Amway's structure is thus similar to a pyramid (even if this is not a pyramid scheme in the strict sense of the term), in which the few take the chunk of the surplus value created by the many. The many thus work for a pittance in the hope that one day they will join those at the top. This scheme can be seen as a metonymy of neoliberal capitalism, with the employees of Amway fitting the type of 'homo neoliberalis', who replaced the old 'homo sovieticus', as suggested by Tomasz Piątek (Piątek 2011, p. 155).

Predictably, the film was not to the taste of Amway bosses and the firm tried to prevent the broadcast of *Welcome to Life!* on television by suing its producers and won the court case. This fact attracted much attention in the Polish press as it undermined the widely held view that the media under capitalism are free, unlike under state socialism (for example Małatyńska 1998; Jałoszewski 2002). Unfortunately, the outrage caused by this crude act of censorship overshadowed discussion about the content of the film, namely the inequalitarian character of neoliberalism. The perceptive essay by Tomasz Piątek is the only article I found which attempts to engage with the film text, rather than its production and distribution history.

### Seeking new life abroad

Among the freedoms Poles achieved following the fall of state socialism was the freedom to seek employment abroad. This subject is tackled by several films, such as *A Bar at Victoria Station* (*Bar na Viktorii*, 2003), a documentary directed by Leszek Dawid about two unskilled young men from Kluczbork, a small town in southwestern Poland, seeking work in England. The film premiered only one year before Poland joined the European Union, of which a major benefit was

the possibility to get legal employment in Britain. It depicts the time when it was still illegal for Poles to work in Britain and hence getting the work permit is an important factor in the two men's circumstances. By the same token, it is an opportunity for various feral entrepreneurs to make money, taking advantage of the naiveté and despair of poor foreigners. The film's protagonists, Piotr and Marek, are promised a job in a hotel if they pay 45, 120 or 150 GBP for a false work permit and then discover that they have paid to get jobs which do not exist. As the days pass, they get more desperate to get any job, even paid as little as £2 per hour, but these jobs do not materialise, while their situation worsens. They spend the little money they brought to the UK, have to leave the room of their friend who allowed them to stay with them for free and their shoes get worn out. In the end they ask the question: 'Why do Poles have to go abroad to earn their living?' The director leaves the characters at the time when one of them decides to return to Poland, although from the closing titles we learn that they both stayed in London where they eventually found work. Even if *A Bar at Victoria Station* has an off-screen happy ending, we get the impression that it comes at a heavy price: misery, humiliation and home sickness. The title of the film refers to a dream one of the characters shares with the viewers: having a small bar at Victoria station, where he could sell Polish dishes, such as bigos and borsch with croquets. They also talk about their desire to get married, have a child and a house. Although the men are victims of the capitalist order, they identify with the ideal of a private entrepreneur and the bourgeois lifestyle.

*A Bar at Victoria Station* was Dawid's student film and it was made under the supervision of Kazimierz Karabasz, one of the leading Polish documentary filmmakers working under state socialism. Karabasz's influence can be detected in the film's style, consisting of following a working class character (or two in this case) who describe their situation in their own words. Although it is easy to make fun of Piotr and Marek, whose coarse language might put off a sensitive ear, ultimately the film elicits compassion and conveys well some universal emotions pertaining to those seeking jobs: anxiety, low self-esteem and a sense of injustice. What the film is missing, however, is any attempt to explain why thousands of people like Piotr and Marek have to leave their towns and villages to earn their daily bread. As the director admits in the interview, he merely wanted to make a film about two young men, who might choose a different path, for example fall in love during their trip, rather than one which analyses a social phenomenon (quoted in Pietrzak 2011, p. 107). In his analysis of *A Bar at Victoria Station* Jarosław Pietrzak, rightly, in my view, attributes such a lack of political ambition on the part of the director to the dominant ideology, which discourages attacking its (neoliberal) foundations (ibid.: 108).

*Warsaw Available* (*Warszawa do wzięcia*, 2009) by Karolina Bielawska and Julia Ruszkiewicz does not tackle foreign migration, only one from the country to the city, but I decided to discuss it in this section, as migrants portrayed in this film encounter similar problems to those in *Silesia* and *A Bar at Victoria Station*. The film can also be looked at in the context of the 'post-PGR films', analysed above, because it concerns people who are determined to leave a post-PGR village. To an even larger extent than Dawid's film, *Warsaw Available* shows the strong influence of Kazimierz Karabasz's style, most importantly his *Krystyna M.* (1973). The film, like *Krystyna M.*, follows in the footsteps of an ordinary person, who is meant to represent a larger group of those who moved from the country to the city. However, there are also differences. Karabasz in *Krystyna M.* presented the story of only one young woman. Her character thus appeared, on the one hand, more individualised, but on the other hand paradigmatic for the whole generation of young people, who moved from the provinces to Warsaw. Bielawska and Ruszkiewicz follow three young women as if to reflect on the fact that there is no single or even dominant scenario of migration; much depends, for example, on the person's initial circumstances. The three women, Ania, Gosia and Ilona, move from the countryside to the city, taking advantage of the 'Bursa' (Boarding School) programme, offered to young women from villages where PGRs used to be, to relocate to Warsaw. Each of the girls, who are between 18 and 21 years old, comes from a modest, although not very poor or disfunctional background. They have only finished secondary school and have never had a job requiring advanced skills. There are also differences between them. Gosia has little to tie her to her native village and is most optimistic about her metropolitan future. Ania left a boyfriend behind in another village and Ilona, who is a single mother, left her little son with her mother, to find employment in the capital. The film just points to two forces in the lives of Ania and Ilona: centripetal and centrifugal. Each force is very strong – the girls are under great pressure to succeed in Warsaw, but they also miss what they left behind in the provinces. In this respect only Gosia can be seen as a contemporary version of Karabasz's *Krystyna M.* Life in Warsaw turns out to be hard. The manual work in service industries, such as restaurants, bars, shops and in security, which the girls eventually find, requires long working hours and being available to their employers all the time. It is a 'zero-hour contract' type of work. As a result, even a monthly visit to see one's family and friends becomes a luxury. Another factor why the young women find it difficult to achieve success in Warsaw is the harsh regime of surveillance, to which they are subjected both at work and at home. After work they have to attend courses where they learn new skills, mostly how to wear the right type of clothes when attending a job interview, talk to one's boss

and prepare food and eat in a 'middle class' way. In the dormitory, where they are allowed to live for several months free of charge, they have to leave the shelves and the floor perfectly clean and make their beds to the satisfaction of a stern, even mildly sadistic supervisor. The whole regime appears to be geared at producing Foucauldian 'docile bodies'. This is unlike Krystyna in Karabas's film, for whom it was enough to fulfil her duty to be accepted and rewarded at work and who did what she pleased in her small apartment. *Warsaw Available* is the story of a contemporary precariat, with few employment rights and no security.

During the course of the narrative Ania and Ilona give up and return to the provinces, blaming it on their weaknesses, not being able to bear separation from their loved ones. Their attitude reflects on the neoliberal ethics, which makes the individual responsible for their failure. We assume that Gosia would stay in Warsaw but the final titles state that she also lost her job and had to leave Warsaw. From the closing titles we also learn that out of 892 girls who took part in the 'Bursa' programme, 479 finished it and found employment in Warsaw, but nobody knows how many of them remained there long term. The film intimates that its overall success rate might be low; hence this is not the best way to address the problem of unemployment and poverty in the Polish countryside. A better way would be to change the provinces, make them more prosperous, so that girls like Ania, Gosia and Ilona could stay there, where they all ultimately wanted to be. This message is reiterated by the girls's comments about Warsaw and the film's mise-en-scene. Ania and Ilona mention again and again that they dislike Warsaw, feeling alien there and acquiring a sense of inferiority which they did not have in their home villages. Warsaw, previously known to them from the media, turns out to be greyer than the villages which they left behind. The space in which they move, such as the main railway station (Warszawa Centralna) and the nearby shopping mall, full of adverts encouraging consumption, underscores their transitory status and inferiority as consumers, as they cannot afford any of the things which are advertised, similarly like their work in bars and restaurants points to their status as servants with practically no rights.

Unlike under state socialism, when the state took upon itself the duty of facilitating the transition of the workers from the country to the city, now this task is 'relocated' to a Catholic charity. Although this fact is merely mentioned in the film, its importance cannot be overestimated. This is because charities are not accountable to the whole of society, but only to those who support them, often acting against the interests of the whole of society and offer less sustainable help than that of state institutions. Furthermore, as the word 'charity' indicates, the recipients of their assistance have to accept it as an act of somebody's good

will, thus without complaining, unlike a client of the state, who might demand better treatment. This is what we observe in the film – the girls are subjected to a tremendous pressure to succeed in a short period, because this might be their only chance.

### Generations of winners and losers

Watching the films discussed so far, one is tempted to ask whether the transformation made sense, given its cost for ordinary people, especially the young. The answer to this question is given by two films by Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz: *I, the Bricklayer* (*Ja, Robotnik budowlany*, 2001) and *Generation '89* (*Pokolenie '89*, 2002).

The first film concerns Albin Siwak (1933-2019), a shock worker, who distinguished himself during the period of rebuilding Warsaw in the 1950s, was active in the (socialist) trade unions before joining the Party in 1968. In the 1980s, when the Party was in a state of decline, he advanced in its hierarchy, becoming a member of its Central Committee and the Political Bureau. During this time he represented the most dogmatic section of the Party, criticising Solidarity, defending martial law and Poland's union with the Soviet Union. In today's language, Siwak can be described as a 'tankie': an honest, but unreformable Stalinist, who eventually became a source of embarrassment to the Party, which in the 1980s tried to modernise itself. In the Polish context, people like him were described as 'concrete' (*beton*).

Zmarz-Koczanowicz's documentary consists largely of her interview with Siwak, against the background of old newsreels, showing various events from Poland's communist past, chiefly the period of martial law and the demonstrations against the government of Jerzy Buzek, concurrent with the period of shooting her film, whose economic politics was neoliberal, leading to problems described in the previous sections of this article. In these interviews Siwak shows pride in his working-class credentials, musing about his pleasure of working as a simple bricklayer and revealing his distrust of the intelligentsia, which puts their interests first. However, he also admits, echoing Marx, that having working-class background does not guarantee having pro-communism views. Equally, people of the intelligentsia or the middle-class background could have communist instincts. What is important here is not so much what Siwak says, but how his discourse is framed. Before we see him talking, he is introduced to students of the private school of journalism by an eminent Polish sociologist, Edward Wnuk-Lipiński, who describes Siwak, probably tongue-in-cheek, as a 'living utopia' (of socialism). He is thus presented as a specimen, who needs to be examined,



rather than somebody with whose voice the director identifies herself, as was the case with Karabasz's films.<sup>1</sup> Wnuk-Lipiński asks his students whether they have heard about Siwak, but most have no idea who he is and even those who are familiar with his name, are unable to associate it with any specific achievements and views. This, points to the fact that in the early 2000s Siwak was an anachronism. The interview with him confirms this fact. He comes across as somebody for whom life stopped in the 1950s, when he was a shock worker. He did not recognise a need to modernise the country or the problems the state socialist economy faced, leading to the comprehensive rejection of the system. His anachronistic mindset is further confirmed by his circle of friends, consisting of old party apparatchiks, ex-army officers and the film director Bohdan Poręba, whose views combined pro-communist sympathies with nationalism. One of them says that only a few people are allowed to enter his house, which he describes as his 'fortress'. Such words are meant to emphasise the privilege of being on friendly terms with Siwak, but for the external observer they are proof that the old communist has a closed mind. Siwak's status as a relic from the state socialist past is further confirmed by him confessing that at some point the Party saw him as an embarrassment and tried to get rid of him, by offering him the post of Polish ambassador to Mongolia.

Although, ostensibly, Siwak's care for the working class is conveyed by a demonstration of working class people against neoliberal policies, which make them poor, Zmarz-Koczanowicz is at pains to discredit them by showing that they are attended mostly by older people and that their character is similar to the old, May Day parades.

Another foray of Zmarz-Koczanowicz into the period of the PRL, which is compared with the present, is *Generation '89*. The film is about people who were born in the 1960s and gained maturity in the 1980s, during the period of the Solidarity movement, martial law and, finally, the Round Table negotiations, which resulted in a peaceful transition of power from the Party to the Solidarity movement. This is a generation whose identity was profoundly shaped by these events – they wouldn't be who they were in 2002, if it were not for the changes brought about by the Solidarity movement.

What is striking about Zmarz-Koczanowicz's film is the choice of the characters. Not only, as Witold Mrozek observes, does she choose those with a specific outlook, which subsequently was associated with the more liberal and cosmopolitan wing of the Solidarity movement, represented by the parties Unia Wolności and Platforma Obywatelska (Mrozek 2011, p. 95), but that she equates this generation with a handful of (mostly) men, who were recruited from the young



intelligentsia, often with significant political and intellectual traditions. These men (and one woman), such as Marcin Meller, Krzysztof Varga, Paweł Piskorski and Anna Smółka, subsequently became very successful, becoming famous journalists, media personalities, owners of advertising agencies, and – in the case of Piskorski – the mayor of Warsaw. One of the protagonists mentions that in the early 1990s there was so much ‘room at the top’, one could simply walk the corridors there and be picked by somebody who offered them the position of director of a department in some ministry or top civil servant. However, Zmarz-Koczanowicz’s interviewees fail to mention that it was only on certain corridors where such offers were made. It is not difficult to guess that these corridors were in Warsaw and were populated by the young elite.

Such a representation points to two ideas, which I find problematic. First, it gives the impression that the Solidarity revolution was an uprising of intellectuals, bored by the monotony of life under state socialism. Such a view, ironically, chimes with the opinion presented by Albin Siwak in the film discussed previously. More precisely, Zmarz-Koczanowicz’s interviewees mention workers, but they function in their stories merely as a background to their activities, which is presented largely as carnivalesque antics, whose purpose was not so much an overthrowing of the system (as they did not even believe that it was possible), as to make fun of it. In reality, however, it was mostly a working-class revolt, albeit supported by a cross-section of the population.

Second, by putting front and centre those who benefitted from the victory of Solidarity, becoming the new postcommunist elite, Zmarz-Koczanowicz suggests that this change had practically no social cost, except for losing a sense of carnival, pertaining for these (still) young men to the 1980s, although the cost was very high, as shown in the films discussed in the previous sections of this article. The (almost complete) erasure of the working class from the Solidarity narrative foretells the position taken by the neoliberal parties, most importantly the Civic Platform.

### **From industrial production to art exhibition**

The last example I decided to use in this article is *Solidarity, Solidarity...* (*Solidarność, Solidarność*, 2005), an omnibus film, made by thirteen directors of different generations, made up of both short documentary and fiction films, asked to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the strikes of 1980, which led to the legalisation of the Solidarity trade union in the same year. Through its very structure, the film acknowledges that there is no ‘master narrative’ about Solidarity; its history is open to multiple interpretations, competing with each other

for the viewers' attention and sympathy. As Tadeusz Szyma admits, the subject is now too big and too complex to be tackled by one director (Szyma 1995, p. 54). Yet, it should be added that the film was initiated by Andrzej Wajda, who suggested its production to Polish state television. By posing himself as the 'father' of this project and making an episode, which includes the stars of *Man of Iron*, Krystyna Janda and Jerzy Radziwiłowicz, as well as the leader of the first Solidarity, Lech Wałęsa, Wajda tacitly suggests that his narrative is still privileged; if it is not a 'master-narrative' then at least it remains a 'father narrative'.

The majority of the etudes are set in the present and take issue with the legacy of the events of 1980 and 1981. Paradoxically, older directors, such as Robert Gliński, Ryszard Bugajski, Jacek Bromski and even Andrzej Wajda, tend to be dismissive about the fruits of the Solidarity revolution. In Bugajski's episode, which takes the form of a music video, the veteran of Polish rock, Ryszard Markowski, sings about Polish history, beginning in the year 1968 and finishing in 2005. His narrative acknowledges the victory of Solidarity, but also the erosion of its ethos post 1989, especially the disappearance of solidarity from Polish life. In Wajda's episode the director interviews Lech Wałęsa, who admits that the early 1980s was the last moment of Polish history when the working class mattered in Poland and by extension, in the whole of Eastern Europe. This was because its importance relied on the Soviet Union's demand for the products of heavy industry, provided by Poland and other 'satellite' countries. Once this demand diminished, the working class declined, as the capitalist West does not want Polish coal or ships. We can conclude that the West, which in *Man of Iron* functioned as the chief ally of Polish workers struggling to overcome state socialism, ultimately proved a false friend.

The conclusion that Solidarity did not do the shipyard workers any good is evinced in the episode by Robert Gliński, who through the medium of Japanese tourists takes us on a tour of the old shipyard in Gdańsk, where the famous strike began. The yard is now derelict, looking like a ghost town, a clear metaphor for the decline of the working class in Poland. The workforce in the Gdańsk shipyard, which was about 20,000 people at the time Wajda and Zajączkowski shot their films, after 1989 was reduced to about 2,000, labouring in over 70 different private companies. Decimated, fragmented and threatened with unemployment, this workforce has little chance to attract attention to their plight, not least because they now work in a democratic country. Once famous for its ships and the political engagement of the workers, today the shipyard is better known as a destination of tourists and musicians. In the mid-2000s Jean Michel Jarre and David Gilmour performed there to celebrate the Solidarity 'revolution'. It also

hosts a lavish 'European Solidarity Centre', a museum and performance space devoted to the memory and heritage of Solidarity. In this sense the trajectory of the Gdańsk shipyard follows in the footsteps of such famous factories, like the factory buildings in New York adopted by Andy Warhol for his studio in the 1960s and Tony Wilson for Factory Records in Manchester in the 1970s, proving that neoliberal capitalism might be good for the artists and those working in the media, but not for the blue-collar workers.

### Conclusion: Transition and the problem of identity

In this article I argue that Polish documentary films made in the 1990s take issue with the influence of the fall of state socialism on the individual and collective identity of Poles. They acknowledge that, paradoxically, this change had the most profound effect on the working class people, virtually crushing their lives and their sense of identity. By contrast, it was conducive to develop a new elite, who originated in the Solidarity movement, but showed no loyalty to workers. Despite this rather depressing diagnosis, none of the films discussed here are nostalgic for state socialism. This part of Polish history is in the past: it can be retold, reconceptualised, but it should not be repeated.

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## (Endnotes)

- <sup>1</sup> Zmarz-Koczanowicz is renowned for adopting such a distant, often mocking attitude to her subjects, as exemplified by her film *Jestem mężczyzną* (*I Am a Man*, 1985).