Wanda Jakubowska's Cinema of Commitment

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to provide a general overview of the work of Wanda Jakubowska (1907–98), the first Polish, female film director to gain national and international recognition. Her career spanned over 50 years, in which she directed 14 full-length feature films, thus being the longest working film director in the history of Polish cinema. She was also one of the highest profile filmmakers to join the Polish communist party after the Second World War and in subsequent years represented the 'party line' among her fellow filmmakers, and lobbied the party on behalf of the cinema industry. The article looks at style, ideology and the most important themes of Jakubowska's work. Its focus is on her films about concentration camps and about contemporary Poland. The article also attempts to establish whether and to what degree Jakubowska was a feminist.

KEY WORDS concentration camps ◆ contemporary stories ◆ propaganda ◆ socialist realist

The purpose of this article is to provide a general overview of the work of Wanda Jakubowska (1907–98), the first Polish female director to gain national and international recognition. A measure of her success are the numerous awards she received in Poland and abroad, including the Award of the World Peace Council in 1951 for *Ostatni etap* (The Last Stage, 1947). Her career spanned over 50 years, in which she directed 14 full-length feature films, thus being the longest working film director in the history of Polish cinema. She performed a series of high-profile administrative and political roles in Polish cinematography. In 1948, Jakubowska became the director of one of three independent production units (Zespoly Autorow Filmowych) and was one of the highest profile filmmakers to join the Polish communist party (Polish United Workers' Party) after the Second World War, representing the 'party line' among her fellow filmmakers, and lobbying the party on behalf of the cinema industry.

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Wanda Jakubowska is also the most controversial character in the history of Polish cinema and attitudes to her work changed in synchrony with political changes in Poland: while she was generally praised in the 1950s, she was much criticized in the 1980s and 1990s. For a long time her involvement in politics, both on and off the screen, precluded serious examination of her oeuvre and in spite of the fame of her name and persona, she remains a relatively unknown director, both in her homeland and abroad. There are no books devoted to her and the majority of articles about her work are reviews of individual films and political critiques, written in a politically charged atmosphere, in which emotional claims often prevailed over rational argument. She was even omitted from the few Polish publications about female cinema. Apart from *The Last Stage* which was her feature debut and the children's film *Krol Macius I* (King Macius I, 1958), her films are neither shown on Polish television, nor available on video; her only pre-war feature film and her documentaries are lost. When I viewed Jakubowska's films at a private showing in the National Film Archive in Warsaw, the film researcher who accompanied me drew my attention to the high quality of the prints, jokingly commenting that it is a good indication that I was the first person to watch them in years.

This relative neglect of Jakubowska's work was a strong reason to re-examine it. I hope that the new social reality in Poland, defined primarily by the collapse of Communism in 1989 and a decade of producing films in new political and economic circumstances, as well as Jakubowska's death in 1998 allow me to approach Jakubowska's work afresh. The recent production of large numbers of films in the newly democratic Poland have made both critics and ordinary viewers there more aware that all films, not only those which are crude propaganda (as Jakubowska's films were often perceived), are representations, rather than presentations of the world as it really is. Their portrayal of reality (most importantly the social and political reality of Poland) is not complete, accurate and neutral, but partial and shaped by various factors, including the film's budget and the dominant ideology of the day. I also argue that against the backdrop of post-Communist film production, in particular the many films which are mysogynistic, Jakubowska's films begin to lose some of their sinister features and reveal ideas which are attractive to large sections of contemporary Polish society.

The fact that Jakubowska is no longer alive encourages me to treat her films as important elements of Polish history. My argument is that thanks to the director's long-lasting commitment to promoting the Communist cause (and in some cases also in spite of it), her films are an excellent source of information about the ideology, politics and culture of post-Second World War Poland. The crucial assumption of my discussion is that Jakubowska was an *auteur* of her work, that she was in control of her

films' production, and that they constitute a generally unified and coherent body of work.

Jakubowska began her career as a left-leaning filmmaker before the Second World War. In 1930, at the age of 23, together with a group of fellow film enthusiasts of Marxist persuasion, she formed the Society of the Devotees of the Artistic Film (Stowarzenie Milosnikow Filmu Artystycznego), known simply as START. In addition to Jakubowska, the group included the future directors Eugeniusz Cekalski, Jerzy Zarzycki and Jerzy Bossak, cameraman Stanislaw Wohl and film historian Jerzy Toeplitz. The society lasted for five years and produced only a few films, most of them short, but its influence on the ideology and shape of Polish national cinema, particularly after the Second World War, cannot be ignored. It is widely accepted that START's programme, emphasizing the 'social usefulness' of films and their educational value, and demanding state assistance for the film industry, had a major impact on the ideology of Polish socialist realism in general and on Jakubowska's films in particular (Bren, 1986: 22; Zwierzchowski, 2000: 51–2). Another important source of her inspiration was the ideology and practice of socialist realist art in the Soviet Union. The ideology, first formulated by Andrei A. Zhdanov in 1934, demanded that artists be 'engineers of human souls'. They were meant to depict reality not in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as objective reality, but in its revolutionary development. In addition to this, the truthfulness and historical accuracy of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the labouring classes in the spirit of socialism (Leyda, 1960; Liehm and Liehm, 1977). Although Zhdanov did not explicitly demand any particular style from the Soviet filmmakers, a characteristic style emerged in subsequent years, defined by simple plots, clearcut conflicts and characters neatly separated into good and evil. A typical Soviet socialist realistic film story was narrated chronologically and the iconography was hugely simplified. Historical spectacles, revolutionary and contemporary stories, particularly construction dramas and narratives set on collective farms, as well as films for and about children, were favoured by the Communist authorities over other types of films (Kenez, 1992: 159–66). Jakubowska was fully committed to make films praising socialist achievements and ideals and criticizing capitalism. Her selection of subjects was also very much in tune with what was favoured by her Soviet colleagues, or rather what the Communist authorities wanted them to choose. Although socialist realism as a dominant paradigm in Polish cinema ended in 1956, she remained faithful to it as long as she worked as a director.

The other important influence on Jakubowska's cinema were her experiences during the Second World War, when she was engaged in the resistance movement, and which led to her arrest in 1942. She spent six

months in the Pawiak prison in Warsaw and was later transported first to the Ravensbruck concentration camp and then to Oswiecim (Auschwitz), from which she was freed on 18 January 1945. In her own words, the years in the camps constituted her most important experiences, both in terms of her personal life and artistic development (Mruklik, 1985: 7). Indeed, four of her films are set during the Second World War and three of them deal specifically with the issue of concentration camps.

Jakubowska's first feature completed after the war, *The Last Stage*, portrays life in the women's part of the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau until it was liberated by the Soviet army. The project was actually conceived during Jakubowska's incarceration. She shared her idea with many fellow prisoners and they passed her their stories to be included in the project (Mruklik, 1985: 7). The co-author of the script was fellow prisoner Gerda Schneider, a German, who, like Jakubowska, dreamt of making a film about life in Auschwitz. The completed film has no single main character, but at least three women can be regarded as leading heroines – Marta, a Polish Jew who works as a translator, Anna, a German nurse and Communist, and the Russian doctor, Eugenia. In spite of their different nationalities, there are many similarities in their views, behaviour and even position in the camp. None of them are ordinary prisoners, but, thanks to their skills, all have senior posts which allow them direct access to the German authorities and give them some safety from persecution. More importantly, they have influence and respect among their fellow prisoners, which is not a consequence of the task the Nazis ask them to perform, but the way they do it, which is actually contrary to the Germans' intentions. Eugenia goes to any length to procure medicines for her patients, Anna helps her and Marta organizes the smuggling of essential commodities into the camp and tries to uncover German plans. Their attitude is strongly contrasted with another hierarchy imposed on the prisoners by the Nazis, the system of 'blockleaders'.

Apart from being individuals, Eugenia, Anna and Marta serve as symbols of the main enemies of fascism – Jewry, Communism and the East – in a way which conforms to the socialist realistic ideology. The similarity of their views and fates (all of them die in the course of the film), as well as Jakubowska's unwillingness to privilege any of them in her narrative, suggests that what each represented was hated equally by the Nazis. Additionally, it was thanks to their cooperation that the Nazis were eventually defeated, both on the small scale of the concentration camp and in the war as a whole. Again, this idea of international solidarity is in tune with the Communist promotion of internationalism over the welfare of the nation. Characteristically, if Jakubowska shows any group of women in a less favourable light than the others, it is the Poles. The blockleaders are mainly Poles and the greedy, haughty and utterly incompetent wife of the owner of a chemist's shop, who becomes the new doctor in the

female camp, is also Polish. Her character can be regarded as a criticism of the Polish pre-war bourgeoisie, the class epitomized by the owners of chemist's shops and which, after the war, became the object of the oppression of the Communist state.

Reaction to the film at the time of its premiere in 1948 was very positive both in Poland and abroad. The reasons for this phenomenal success are complex and it is impossible to establish all of them. However, some factors reappear in the opinions of critics and film historians. The first, as Tadeusz Lubelski notes, is simply the subject of the film: the Second World War and the concentration camps. At the time the film was made, Poles were keen to see films about the war. When in 1947 the popular Polish film magazine, *Film*, conducted a survey among its readers, asking them what themes they favoured in cinema, the most common answer was 'the Second World War' (Lubelski, 1992: 76). One can assume that at the end of the 1940s there was also a desire in many other countries to see the war on screen. Second, the strong pacifist message of *The Last Stage* captured the popular mood in both the East and the West, when everyone worldwide needed to console themselves with the assurance 'never again' which ends the film. Over the next decades the mood both in Poland and abroad changed; pacifism was no longer taken for granted, the Soviet army was associated rather with an oppressive force, which thwarted political dissent in the Soviet Union and its satellites, including Poland, rather than with those who liberated Auschwitz. This affected the reception of Jakubowska's later films, devoted to the issue of the camps. Third, and perhaps the most important reason for the immense popularity and appreciation of *The Last Stage*, is Jakubowska's use of what Tadeusz Lubelski describes as the 'witness strategy', which means representing a particular reality from the point of view of a person who knows it well, either by having first-hand experience or by using the insight of other witnesses, as did Zofia Nalkowska in her book *Medaliony* (Medallions, 1945) (Lubelski, 1992: 75–83). However, Lubelski persuasively argues that the witness strategy, which tried to show the whole truth of Auschwitz, was intertwined in *The Last Stage* with the strategy of propaganda, which attempts to awaken in the viewers hatred towards fascism and a sympathy for Communism. The witness strategy was further compromised by Jakubowska's conformity to certain Hollywood conventions, which prevented her, for example, from showing the emaciated and deformed bodies of the prisoners, or their infestation with vermin (Lubelski, 1992: 77–83). I suggest that, with the passage of time and the production of numerous feature and documentary films about camps (some of them, as Lubelski suggests, imitating in a way Jakubowska's portrayal of Auschwitz, while others are much more explicit in showing the degradation of life behind the wire), *The Last Stage* lost some of its appeal. Still, when Jakubowska died in 1998, she was commemorated

mainly as the author of *The Last Stage*, although it is difficult to establish if this was due to a true appreciation of her early work or rather the critics' unwillingness to recall her more overtly 'evangelical' socialist realistic films, such as *Zolnierz zwyciestwa* (Soldier of Victory, 1953) or *Pozegnanie z diablem* (Farewell to the Devil, 1956).

In 1964, Jakubowska returned to the theme of concentration camps, directing *Koniec naszego swiata* (The End of Our World), based on the novel by Tadeusz Holuj, who, like Jakubowska, had been imprisoned in a concentration camp. The film takes the form of a series of flashbacks. It starts at a time contemporaneous to the period of its production – a car, driven by a Polish man, is stopped by two American tourists, who ask him to give them a lift to Auschwitz. The driver is a Pole called Henryk, a Communist, who was imprisoned in Auschwitz, the woman tourist is the daughter of a Jew who died in the camp, the other American is simply a tourist with no personal connections with the Nazis' victims. Henryk not only gives the strangers a lift, but offers them a guided tour of Auschwitz, which allows him to recollect his own past.

Most of the screen time is devoted to the representation of the camp when it was 'alive'. The moments when the narrative moves forward to the 1960s, although rare, allow the director to ponder on the attitudes and lifestyle of contemporary western society, encapsulated in the behaviour of the American. His attitude to Auschwitz is completely that of a 'tourist'. For example, he objects to the way the exhibition is laid out and criticizes the work of the camp guides, finding all of them unprofessional, too 'dry', well below the standard of good museums. On the whole, he does not perceive the camp as a place of torture and death, but somewhere which is meant to entertain him; as it obviously does not fulfil his expectations, he is deeply dissatisfied. The tourist also epitomizes American self-interest and lack of concern for the feelings of others. For example, he ignores – even mocks – his companion's genuine interest in Henryk's story, constantly asking the others to film him, using his expensive camera. The unflattering portrayal of the American serves to expose western consumerism, selfishness and moral vacuity and contrast it with the more serious and ascetic atittudes of Poles. The message is that people who think about their own pleasure will not understand the atrocities of the camp, and will be unable to prevent a similar tragedy occurring in future. Another perhaps slightly contradictory message conveyed in *The End of Our World* is that one cannot appreciate the extreme character of Nazism without really seeing life in the camp with one's own eyes. The concentration camp, preserved as a museum, is really only a museum, which by its nature as an object of the tourist's gaze undermines the message about the atrocities that were committed there. Consequently, there is something inadequate about the guides taking groups of visitors to various places of martyrdom and the tourists leaving flowers in

Auschwitz. One feels as if a stronger and less conventional reaction is needed to express the horror and sadness in the face of knowledge about the camps.

In many ways, *The End of Our World* is a much more subtle film than *The Last Stage*. It is worth mentioning that the director herself regarded it as the best film of her career (Hollender, 1997: 25) – an opinion with which I agree entirely. *The End of Our World* also received good reviews, but did not enjoy the same success as *The Last Stage*. The reasons for this were largely the same as those which assured the success of *The Last Stage*: in the 1960s, often described as the time of 'small stabilization', the Second World War stopped being a 'fashionable' subject – on the contrary, there was a certain fatigue among the Polish audience, exposed during the past decade to a large number of films about the war. Instead, the viewers demanded movies which were lighter in tone and portrayed present-day Poland. It is worth mentioning that the middle of the 1960s also marks the end of the Polish School, which, in common with Jakubowska's films, concentrated on the war, although representing it in a different way. The style of filmmaking also changed: in contrast to the 1950s and 1970s, the 1960s are not characterized by any distinctive school in Polish cinema, but produced a large variety of films, the most popular being comedies, such as *Maz swojej zony* (The Husband of His Wife, 1960) by Stanislaw Bareja.

In her last film, *Zaproszenie* (Invitation, 1985), also belonging to Jakubowska's 'concentration camp' paradigm, contemporary times overshadow the wartime past. The main character of the story is Anna, a concentration camp survivor, nowadays working as a highly respected paediatric surgeon. She is past retirement age, but continues to work, as many parents are convinced that she is the only doctor able to save their children. The event to trigger Anna's memory is the visit of her old flame, Piotr, who now lives in the USA and is a professor of ecology. The reason that they never married was the war; he left their hometown of Cracow in order to fight, and Anna, on hearing of his death and persuaded by her own mother, married another man, who subsequently died in the war. Anna takes Piotr to Auschwitz, Sachsenhausen and Ravensbruck, where she was imprisoned during the war. As they walk through what was later converted into a museum, she reminisces on her youth. As in the previous films, we witness the struggle between the Nazis who want to divide the prisoners and the prisoners who resist by helping and supporting each other.

In the film, set in the 1980s, Anna is played by Antonina Gordon-Gorecka, who also played the German nurse in *The Last Stage*. In my opinion her appearance and even her having the same name as the heroine of the earlier film is deliberate, signifying Jakubowska's wish to emphasize that those who survived the camps, including herself, did not change fundamentally; they remained honest, supportive, altruistic. At

the same time the world around them changed a lot, the pursuit of material goods becoming the main purpose of people's lives. In this respect Anna is strongly contrasted with her own daughter, Natalia, who wants to be rich and successful, rather than to serve others or her country. The ultimate indication of the gulf between their attitudes is Natalia's decision to visit the USA at the invitation of Piotr and not to return to Poland. *Invitation* also portrays Jakubowska's disappointment with official politics, as it is understood in the 1980s, when people associate it not with ideas, but with names, and when it is regarded more often as a vehicle of self-advancement than a tool of social improvement.

While in Jakubowska's camp films the evangelical aspect of her work, concerning Communism, might have slipped the audience's attention, overshadowed by other messages, particularly the author's pacifism and condemnation of fascism, in her 'contemporary stories' Jakubowska's commitment to the Communist cause is blatant. It is thanks to these films, as well as to *Soldier of Victory*, which is discussed later, that she is regarded as a model socialist realist. Jakubowska devoted more films to the issue of building a socialist Poland than to any other subject; they include *Pozegnanie z diablem* (Farewell to the Devil, 1956), *Historia wspolczesna* (Contemporary Story, 1960), *Goraca linia* (Express Production Line, 1965), *150 na godzine* (150 Kilometres Per Hour, 1971) and, to a certain extent, the previously discussed *Invitation* (1985). Her plans to portray the positive changes, resulting from introducing a socialist mode of production and a one-party political system was even more comprehensive than what she finally managed to achieve. In an interview, given in 1951, she said:

> I would like to make contemporary films, particularly connected with the 6-Year Plan. I refer to our own, Polish way of building Socialism. One of my projects, based on the script by Marian Brandys, concerns the builders of Nowa Huta. Its title will be *Beginning of the Story*. I would also like to make a film about Nowe Tychy, which changed from a small, sleepy town into a modern industrial centre, as well as films about the birth of industry in Lublin, the Bialystok region and many other parts of Poland, neglected by pre-war governments. (Nowicki, 1951: 6)

The setting of the majority of Jakubowska's contemporary films is, indeed, provincial Poland, which after years of pre-war underdevelopment, began to catch up with more prosperous regions, largely thanks to the Communist authorities, who decided to build many factories there. In *Contemporary Story* it is a chemical factory; in *Express Production Line* a coal mine; in *Farewell to the Devil* a village where a cooperative is about to be set up. The conflicts in the films, in a typically socialist realistic manner, revolve around material production, and private lives are strongly influenced – almost determined – by the character's type of work. The first two films belonging to this genre, *Farewell to the Devil* and *Contemporary Story*,

are based on real events, which the director learnt about from newspaper reports. However, as with Jakubowska's camp films, the crude facts (probably already coloured by the newspaper journalists) were further 'repackaged' in a way which made them useful tools of Communist propaganda. This applies particularly to *Farewell to the Devil*, whose characters fall into three main categories, utilized by the bulk of socialist realistic filmmakers in Poland and in the Soviet Union: a 'master' who never makes any mistakes and knows perfectly how to fulfil the Communist ideals, an 'enemy' who tries to upset his plans, and a 'student' who, influenced by his 'master', starts to work for the Communist cause (Lubelski, 1992: 99). The role of the master is taken by an investigative journalist, the enemy is a rich farmer (*kulak*), who uses subterfuge to discourage his fellow farmers from joining the cooperative, and the student is the *kulak*'s fiancee who, in the end, falls in love with the journalist. Similarly, all the conflicts presented in *Farewell to the Devil*, can be reduced to an antagonism between the old system, epitomized by private ownership of the land, and the new, symbolized by the large, cooperative farm.

In spite of the director's commitment to the Communist cause, Jakubowska is not slow to show certain shortcomings of the Communist Party or of the social structure, organized according to Communist principles. For example, the local party organization is portrayed as overbureaucratic and secretive and we learn that the socialist principles of allocating various shortage goods, such as bricks, seeds or fertilizer, equally among the villagers are flouted. Yet, Jakubowska's criticism is always partial and 'constructive' – she never undermines the Communist system itself, but attacks the people who twist and abuse it, her purpose being to persuade her audience that it is worth following the party line, which means being honest and selfless.

Although Jakubowska's portrayal of provincial Poland in this and other films is strongly 'coloured' by her desire to promote the Communist cause, many of her contemporary stories contain a lot of local customs and detail concerning the ordinary lives of factory workers. Moreover, often shot on location with extensive use of long shots and long takes (which seem to be unsuitable means for the arbitrariness of socialist realistic films), the films convey, perhaps against the director's wish, the sleepy atmosphere of small Polish towns, which until the Cinema of Moral Concern of the 1980s were rarely conveyed in Polish movies. I suggest that with the passage of time some of Jakubowska's films reveal an authenticity which passed unnoticed when the films were made.

As with Jakubowska's camp films, one can detect a certain trajectory in her films about contemporary life in Poland: the first films were the most popular and praised by the critics, while the last ones were scorned by the critics and ignored by ordinary viewers. The reasons for this pattern lie in the films' subject matter, messages and style. Thus *Farewell to the Devil*

touched upon issues regarded as very important by millions of viewers: why Poles should choose socialism rather than a capitalist, individualistic system of production. Moreover, in this film Jakubowska portrays an environment where opposition to political change was at its strongest – rural Poland. Moreover, the 'witness strategy', used by the director in *Farewell to the Devil* and *Contemporary Story*, although intermingled with heavy pro-Communist rhetoric and often Hollywood-style acting and cinematography, created an impression that the films were portraying essential aspects of Polish reality accurately. The best indication of this is the fact that in many of the reviews of *Farewell to the Devil* and *Contemporary Story*, the critics wrote solely about the issue discussed and not about their style.

As time passed, the gulf between Jakubowska's films and the dominant paradigms in Polish cinema grew. Most importantly, by the 1970s and 1980s, her films looked dated and marginal against the backdrop of the work of such directors as Krzysztof Kieslowski, Feliks Falk, Agnieszka Holland, Marek Piwowski, Antoni Krauze, Krzysztof Zanussi and Andrzej Wajda, many of whom belonged to the Cinema of Moral Concern. The values which Jakubowska promoted, such as solidarity, selflessness, rejection of materialism, were not shared by the new generation of viewers. They were more individualistic than previous generations of Poles and strongly objected to the disparity between the lavish lifestyles of those who had political power and the official ideology of socialism, which promoted selflessness and asceticism – one of the main themes of the Cinema of Moral Concern. Moreover, the new generation of directors brought with them a new understanding of 'realism', based on the use of documentary techniques and naturalistic acting. Again, against the backdrop of films such as *Za sciana* (Behind the Wall, 1971) by Krzysztof Zanussi, *Palec Bozy* (God's Finger, 1972) by Antoni Krauze or *Kobieta samotna* (Woman on Her Own, 1981), *150 Kilometres Per Hour* and *Invitation* look very unnatural.

Apart from the large number of films devoted to the issue of building and strengthening socialism in Poland, the main reason why Jakubowska is regarded as a socialist realist is her film *Soldier of Victory*. Made in 1953, the year regarded as the zenith of Stalinism in Polish political and cultural life, it is a model revolutionary story, featuring as the main character one of Poland's most famous Communists, Wladyslaw Swierczewski, known also as General Walter. Born in 1897 into a working-class family, he took part in almost every important event of the 20th century in Poland and Europe. He fought in the Russian October Revolution and in the subsequent Civil War of 1918–20 on the side of the Bolsheviks. Later he was a 'political commissar' in the Red Army and was sent in 1936 by the Soviet authorities to fight in the Spanish Civil War. During the Second World War he was the chief organizer and leader of the Polish army on Soviet

territory. After the war, as defence minister, he was responsible for dealing with the Ukrainian underground opposition against Polish authority in the Bieszczady mountains, and he died in 1948 in unexplained circumstances. A national hero in the 1950s, nowadays Swierczewski is regarded principally as the person responsible for many military failures and atrocities, including the extermination during the Second World War of hundreds of soldiers of the Home Army.

To present such a rich biography in a way which would educate the viewers in a spirit of Communism and satisfy many of Swierczewski's party friends and enemies, who held positions of power in deciding the future of Polish cinematography, constituted a major challenge for Jakubowska. The script had to be rewritten many times before it was accepted by party officials and the very process of filming proved very difficult (Madej, 1991a, 1991b; Modrzejewska, 1991). The ultimate result is a film made up of two two-hour parts and featuring almost a hundred actors and several hundred extras. Jakubowska covers all important events of Swierczewski's life, from his childhood during the Revolution of 1905 to his tragic death in 1948; *Soldier of Victory* was later labelled the first Polish super-production. When it was released in 1953, it was regarded as one of the greatest achievements of Polish cinema. The reason why the film was acclaimed was not only its subject matter – the life of an archetypal Communist hero, but the director's ability to skilfully combine Polish affairs with international history, promoting patriotism and internationalism at the same time. This, of course, was at a price – the price was psychological subtlety and historical accuracy. All the characters, including the title hero, are one-dimensional, either completely good or unutterably bad, and all conflicts are depicted simplistically. In most of the events, Swierczewski's political role is hugely exaggerated. This applies particularly to the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution where Swierczewski is represented as the second most important figure (after Stalin) in defeating the enemies of both Russia and Poland.

All the events in *Soldier of Victory* are shown from a Stalinist perspective. In effect, the World Wars and the Spanish Civil War are all regarded as exclusively class wars with workers and the bourgeoisie fighting on opposing sides of the barricade. According to Jakubowska, during the First World War Polish workers had the same objectives as workers from Russia or Germany, and Polish landlords and factory owners the same objectives as their counterparts from other countries, which was simply not true. The film promotes the idea of constant 'vigilance' against a conspiracy of an international network of spies of the secret society of industrialists from Germany, Britain and the USA, emulating the atmosphere in the Soviet Union and Poland during the political purges of the early 1950s. This vision of the world is different from the picture created by Jakubowska in *The Last Stage* and *The End of Our World*; in *The Last Stage*

it was inclusive, in *Soldier of Victory* exclusive; everybody who does not demonstrate that they are pro-Communist is treated as an enemy.

Of all the reviews published in the year of its premiere, in my opinion the most successful in both identifying the Stalinist 'virtues' of the film and applying the unique language of the socialrealistic 'critique' is one written by Wieslaw Gruszecki. He writes:

> The film shows us Swierczewski always on the frontline of the barricade, ready to fight for the holy victory of the party, country and socialism. We see his life against a broad historical background. Capitalism: the mean conspiracy of industrial magnates, tsardom, the Catholic Church, Hitler, Gestapo, American intelligence, fascist bands, immigrants, agents provocateurs infiltrating the workers' parties, all use their sinister tentacles to suffocate humanity. Against them we see thousands and millions of soldiers and revolutionaries like Karol, always active and vigilant. The film makes us realize the meaning of the fight for a new world and a new Poland. We see, that the enemy does not surrender and we must resist him on many fronts. The party teaches us how we should treat the enemy and *Soldier of Victory*, shows us how to use the knowledge in concrete action. (Gruszecki, 1953: 12)

It is easy to dismiss both Gruszecki's review and its subject as driven by ideology. Indeed, after the collapse of Communism *Soldier of Victory* was strongly criticized for its political and artistic 'totalitarianism', which resulted from subordinating all aspects of the film to its propagandist function (Madej, 1991b; Zwierzchowski, 2000: 134–42). Although I agree that the sociopolitical values of the film are unacceptable, I resist the opinion that they preclude *Soldier of Victory* having artistic merit. I argue that due to its skilful montage, which ignores chronology and holds in play several different scenes of action and dashing production, especially of battle scenes, *Soldier of Victory* succeeded artistically; and I also suggest that the fierce propaganda not only failed to prevent the aesthetic accomplishment of the film, but was actually conducive to it. The scenes most charged with anti-capitalist sentiment are the best in the whole film. No wonder, then, that when several years ago *Soldier of Victory* was re-released by Polish television, one critic compared it to the films of another female filmmaker who skilfully combined art with propaganda – Leni Riefenstahl (Atlas, 1995: 27).

In the interviews given by Jakubowska in the 1990s, she expressed a certain unease about *Soldier of Victory* and Polish Stalinism. She mentions, for example, a young officer who worked as her consultant in the film production, who was subsequently accused of conspiracy against the Communist authorities and executed, and admits that at the time she trusted 'her beloved party' too much (Madej, 1991a: 31). Yet, it must equally be emphasized that no episode in Polish history, either before or after the collapse of Communism, changed her values or her belief that

Poland chose correctly to join the community of socialist countries after the Second World War. Several months before her death she said: 'I am an unreformed Communist' (Hollender, 1997: 25).

Being a Communist and socialist realist also had a major influence on the way Jakubowska represented women. However, as with many aspects of Polish reality which she portrayed, other factors also played a significant part in the way in which women were shown in her films. One such factor was a traditionally Polish ideal of femininity – that of the Polish Mother. Another, to which I have already hinted, was Jakubowska's biography, especially her camp experiences, and the postwar reality of ordinary Polish women. I devote the last part of my analysis to discussing these various influences, starting with the myth of the Polish Mother.

This myth, it must be explained, was born in the 19th century when, following the 'partitions' between Prussia, Russia and Austria, Poland ceased to exist as a separate state. At the time, Polish women assumed the role of leading defender of the spiritual idea of Poland. Jan Prokop characterizes the Polish Mother as the one 'who sends her son, husband or lover to fight for freedom, who waits for their return, and dresses their wounds . . . who mourns their heroic death on the battlefield or cries over their exile to Siberia' (Prokop, 1991: 415; cited in Ostrowska, 1998: 421). The myth of the Polish Mother is also deeply rooted in the maternal discourse of Christianity. As Ewa Morawska observes: 'After the partition, she [the Virgin Mary] became the Dolorosa, the Sufferer, equated with Poland under the Cross' (Morawska, 1984: 32; cited in Ostrowska, 1998: 423).

The references to the Polish Mother are most pronounced in Jakubowska's war films. Elzbieta Ostrowska argues that in *The Last Stage* Jakubowska at the same time conveyed and manipulated the myth of the Polish Mother in order to suit Communist propaganda. A woman in this film

> . . . symbolizes the suffering and heroism experienced by the whole nation. In a climactic scene, a Polish mother is deprived of her newborn baby by a German SS doctor. The despair on her face, shown in close-up, demonstrates the continuing tragedy of Poland. It is worth noting that this traditional representation of Polish women is conjoined at this point with the idea of international solidarity between women of different nationalities, who help each other in the camp. This is included partly because it was useful in relation to the desire of Communist propaganda to speak about internationalism at the expense of the interests of the nation. (Ostrowska, 1998: 424–5)

The image of a Polish woman giving birth in a camp can be also found in two later films directed by Jakubowska: *Spotkania w mroku* (Meetings in the Dark, 1960, set in a Nazi labour camp) and *Invitation*. However, its

connotations changed over the years. In *The Last Stage* the director foregrounded the suffering of a mother, deprived of her child, the mother embodying the suffering of the Polish nation. In *Invitation*, on the other hand, the emphasis is put on birth, which symbolizes the birth (or rebirth) of the nation after the atrocities of the war. In *Invitation* the baby (a boy) is not taken away from the mother by the Germans, but saved by the fellow prisoners, among them Anna, who helped the mother during the birth and after the war became a paediatrician. In spite of the extremely difficult conditions of the camp, the boy survives and after the war becomes a successful farmer, living in the mountains. He also becomes a kind of spiritual son to both of these women: his real mother (who became a nurse) and Anna. The transformation of a story of a suffering mother, who had lost her child, into a narrative of a happy mother, who sees her child growing, can also be read as veiled praise of a socialist Poland. In Jakubowska's film it is a happy, peaceful country in which women do not lose their sons to wars and uprisings any more.

As Ostrowska notes, 'the myth of the Polish Mother, with its perfection and infallibility, placed woman in a superior position within Polish cultural discourses yet inevitably repressed her own subjectivity' and was 'a fiercely constraining model for Polish femininity' (Ostrowska, 1998: 423). The same opinion can be voiced in reference to the representation of women in Jakubowska's 'camp films'. Her interest in the role of women as mothers, and the fact that the 'nurturing professions', such as doctors and nurses, are the most common female occupations in her films, brings Jakubowska close to the ideological position of the Catholic Church in Poland. It also links Jakubowska to another prominent female director of her generation, whose name was mentioned before – Leni Riefenstahl. For example, Susan Sontag, discussing *The Last of Nuba*, Riefenstahl's book of photographs from the years 1927–72, writes: 'Her portrait of the Nuba goes further than her films in evoking one aspect of the fascist ideal: a society in which women are merely breeders and helpers, excluded from all ceremonial functions' (Sontag, 1983: 90). Such an emphasis on motherhood by a filmmaker of overtly Communist views might appear paradoxical. However, it is worth remembering that the Communist governments, in common with the Catholic Church, often placed mothers on a pedestal, for example the awarding of medals to women who bore more than five children by the Russian government after the Second World War (when the country was heavily depopulated) or the initiative of General Jaruzelski, who introduced martial law in Poland, to build a 'Polish Mother Memorial Hospital' in the 1980s, as a tribute to all Polish mothers.

Jakubowska herself explained the persistence of an image of a young woman giving birth by the fact that she remembered it from the times spent in the concentration camp. This memory apparently shaped her

own ideas, particularly her hatred of Nazism and her commitment to Communism as the system which defeated fascism. It is worth noticing that Jakubowska was not the only filmmaker to use the motifs of mothers and children incarcerated in the concentration camps as a vehicle to denounce Nazi ideology, although she was the first to use it very effectively. The authors of other war films, such as *Sophie's Choice* (1982) by Alan J. Pakula or Roberto Benigni's *La vita é bella* (Life Is Beautiful, 1997) all treated the fate of mothers / parents separated from their children as the ultimate testimony to the inhuman nature of Nazism.

In the remaining films of Jakubowska representations of women are less informed by the myth of the Polish Mother and more by the attitudes to women characteristic of the Communist authorities, and by the social reality of women in postwar Poland. The influences were often contradictory, as the Communist ideology emphasized the immense opportunities for women in countries which adopted Communism, particularly in education, professional work and in areas which were previously dominated by men, while millions of real women often felt that the new reality brought them more disadvantages than advantages. Moreover, in spite of the nominal equality of men and women, in Communist countries women typically earned less than men and rarely achieved higher positions in politics and social life. As in many of the Soviet and Polish films set in the postwar period and belonging to the socialist realistic paradigm, such as *Irena do domu* (Irena Go Home, 1995) directed by Jan Fethke, *Autobus odjezdza 6.20* (The Bus is Leaving at 6.20, 1953) by Jan Rybkowski or *Przygoda na Mariensztacie* (Adventure on Mariensztat, 1953) by Leonard Buczkowski, Jakubowska refers to the opportunities of education and professional development which the Communist government created for women. There is a significant number of female students shown in her films and it is suggested that it is largely thanks to educated women that Poland was able to overcome its pre-war backwardness and poverty, examples being Ania in *150 Kilometres Per Hour* and Franka in *Farewell to the Devil*, both studying agriculture and eager to apply their knowledge to their family farms or collectives. Women in her films often also show a political maturity and insight which their male counterparts lack, as demonstrated in *Express Production Line*, *Farewell to the Devil* and *150 Kilometres Per Hour*. Having said that, I must add that we do not find women of the type which is most widely associated with socialist realism in Jakubowska's films: women performing typically male tasks, clad in masculine clothes and paying no attention to their physical appearance. Against the backdrop of such socialist realistic heroines as Hanka Ruczajowna in *Adventure on Mariensztat* or Wanda Bugajowna in *Niedaleko Warszawy* (Not Far from Warsaw, 1954), directed by Maria Kaniewska, Jakubowska's female characters, with their delicate features and good manners look almost as if they were transplanted from Hollywood.

In many of her films (perhaps unconsciously), Jakubowska shows us a huge gap between the educational and professional achievements of Polish women and their actual inferior position in society. This glass ceiling is most visible in the situation of Anna in *Invitation*. This brave woman with an obvious talent for leadership did not achieve a status commensurate to her talents and accomplishments, but retained positions inferior to her less gifted and less hard-working male colleagues. In spite of being regarded as the best paediatrician in the whole hospital, she is only an 'ordinary' doctor. Her male boss, perhaps envious of the respect she arouses among patients and fellow doctors, undermines her at every step and even tries to force her into retirement. Similarly, the political and industrial establishment which Jakubowska often portrays in her films is all male. Women are reduced to morally supporting men who make decisions of the utmost importance for their factory, country or party. Consequently, in the films set after the Second World War, men typically hold the main roles and women are cast as secondary characters. Neither Jakubowska's female characters nor the author herself condemn or even question the status quo. The situation when the factory boss or the party leader is male, while his subordinates and helpers are women, is presented as completely natural. Moreover, one can detect in Jakubowska's film a certain disapproval of women who invest their energy and ambition in their professional career. For example, Anna's daughter in *Invitation* is a successful photographer, but is represented as vain and immature and it is even suggested that she neglects her children. It is worth adding that in many Polish socialist realistic films, such as *Irena Go Home* and *The Bus is Leaving at 6.20*, the female characters hold more prominent positions in Polish political and social life than 'Jakubowska's women' and their professional aspirations are always regarded as completely positive.

On several occasions, Jakubowska treats the men's attitude to women's emancipation as a criterion to distinguish between the progressive (socialist) and conservative members of society. Thus, in *Bialy mazur* (White Mazurka, 1978), which is set in the 19th century, the progressive Polish socialist party demands giving women equal rights with men, while the reactionary Polish aristocracy treats the idea as a sinister joke. Similarly, in *Farewell to the Devil* the peasants who are against the setting up of a cooperative in their village want to limit women's role to domestic activities, while the progressive villagers appreciate women's participation in local politics and decision-making which affect a wider community.

As has been emphasized on many previous occasions, socialist realistic poetics or aesthetics were a crucial influence on Jakubowska's style. Consequently, looking for traces of feminine aesthetics in her films, as the term is understood by Claire Johnston, Laura Mulvey, Julia Knight, Teresa de Lauretis and many other feminist writers and filmmakers, proves a

futile exercise. First, Jakubowska never abandoned mainstream, narrative, realistic cinema in order to create a formalist, counter-cinema, as was promoted by Johnston and Mulvey (Johnston, 1985; Mulvey, 1992). Second, her films do not address their spectator as a woman, which for de Lauretis is a crucial characteristic of a feminist aesthetics (de Lauretis, 1987: 133). Furthermore, there is very little in Jakubowska's films of what Julia Knight, following Maya Deren, defines as 'a vertical investigation of a situation – concern not with what is occurring, but with what it feels like or what it means' (Knight, 1992: 123). The only possible exception is to be found in *Invitation*, when the emphasis is not on the war as such, but on the experience of the war and its meaning for a particular woman – Anna.

To sum up this aspect of the director's work, I argue that although Jakubowska gave more prominent parts to women than most Polish filmmakers of her own and later generations, and her female characters usually deserve our utmost respect, admiration and sympathy, she cannot be regarded as a feminist. Her attitude to women, being shaped by various, often contradictory influences, lacks focus and consequence. Moreover, her portrayal of women (similar to her portrayal of children, which deserves a separate study) was typically subordinate to the purpose of promoting the Communist cause.

In conclusion I would reiterate the fact that Jakubowska's cinema was highly ideological. She always tried and sometimes succeeded – to use a famous (or infamous) phrase – to be an engineer of human souls, to influence and educate her viewers in the spirit of socialism, pacifism and internationalism. Only a few of her films found a lasting place in the history of Polish cinema, but all demonstrate consequence and integrity, which in my opinion deserve interest and even respect, particularly in the light of the unusual length of her career as a director. One can argue that integrity was her main failure – while other directors, who started as socialist realists, such as Jerzy Kawalerowicz and Jan Rybkowski, were able to adapt to new ideas, subjects and poetics, even played a major role in creating new cinematic schools and paradigms, Jakubowska remained faithful to socialist realism. My answer to that argument is that some people's failures are as notable as others' triumphs.

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