

What women want?: Representation of women of different generations in *Zaproszenie (Invitation, 1985)*, directed by Wanda Jakubowska and *Teraz ja (It's Me, Now, 2004)*, directed by Anna Jadowska

Much has been written about continuities of Polish cinema: the succession of movements, in which the new school opposed but also borrowed from the old ones, the young stars replacing the old ones, the different generation of directors which, nevertheless, shared many values and thematic concerns. However, openly or tacitly this continuity refers to male cinema. For example, when talking about Polish stardom, Daniel Olbrychski immediately comes to mind as a successor to Zbigniew Cybulski, the missing actor in *Wszystko na sprzedaż (Everything for Sale, 1968)* by Andrzej Wajda. Similarly, the most potent symbol of permanence and the health of Polish cinema, Andrzej Wajda, is, of course, male. By contrast, cinema created by Polish female directors is hardly discussed in terms of continuity, succession and inheritance. There is no discussion about any 'female movements' in Polish cinema, either as phenomena in their own right, or as significantly contributing to dominant paradigms within national cinema. If they are considered at all, they typically feature merely as an appendix to male cinema.

This paper is a modest attempt to address this unbalanced approach by trying to find connections between two films by female directors of different generations and made in different periods: *Zaproszenie (Invitation, 1985)*, directed by Wanda Jakubowska and *Teraz ja (It's Me, Now, 2004)*, directed by Anna Jadowska. I am not implying that these films belong to a specific school or paradigm, which was previously overlooked by film historians. Rather, following Michel Foucault's claim that science (and humanities in particular) does not consist of identifying any 'organic' connections, but creating them (see Foucault 1986: 284), I perceive my work as a contribution to creating a discourse on women's cinema as continuous, as a series of films consciously or unconsciously entering a dialogue with other films and offering new answers to the same questions. One such question can be put simply as 'What Polish women want?', for themselves and, perhaps, for any wider community.

Wanda Jakubowska (b. 1907 – d. 1998) is the first Polish female director to gain national and international recognition and one of the most famous filmmakers born on Polish soil. Until the 1980s, when their debut films made such directors as Agnieszka Holland and Barbara Sass, she was the most famous female filmmaker in Poland. Her fame is due to films concerning concentration camps, to a large extent based on her own experience of incarceration and some overtly political films, advocating Stalinism, most importantly, *Żołnierz zwycięstwa (Soldier of Victory, 1953)* about the Polish Stalinist General, Karol Świerczewski. *Invitation* is the third film Jakubowska devoted to this subject, following *Ostatni etap (The Last Stage, 1947)* and *Koniec naszego świata (The End of Our World, 1964)*. It is also her least known and critically acclaimed film tackling this subject, which partly reflects the growing boredom of Polish audiences with the subject of the war and concentration camps, and partly Jakubowska's insufficient ability to adapt to the changing styles of Polish cinema and the new tastes of viewers. However, it should be mentioned that the director did not want to stay aloof from her audiences by focusing solely on Poland's past. On the contrary, she wanted to engage with contemporary issues and to understand the incoming generations of Poles. *Invitation* points to this desire. In fact, the film testifies to the director's double interest in the history and present day of Poland and in their mutual relationship.

As with *Ostatni etap (The Last Stage, 1947)*, *Invitation* focuses on a woman's war history. Anna, like the characters in *The Last Stage*, was imprisoned in Auschwitz, worked there as a doctor and engaged in anti-Nazi resistance, which included attempts to smuggle documents, and save the lives of fellow prisoners, including incarcerated children. Due to the fact that she is played by Antonina Gordon-Górecka, an actress who was cast as one of the three main characters in *The Last Stage*, we can regard her as the same person, only forty or so years older. She is also the same in the sense that the experience of incarceration marked her for the rest of her life. After the war Anna became a paediatrician, performing life-saving operations on children. As it is tacitly suggested, she also remained an ardent anti-fascist, outraged by any attempts to undermine the importance of war

in Polish and world history. *Invitation* begins when two events that trigger Anna's memory. The first is the anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War, celebrated on television; the second an unexpected visit by Anna's first husband, Piotr. These episodes are connected, as Anna and Piotr's wedding was cut short by the outbreak of war. The couple were separated not only for the duration of the war, but for the following years as well. Piotr was fighting in the army on many different fronts and presumed killed by the enemy. Anna married his brother, Janek and, together with Janek, ended up in the concentration camp. When after the war she learnt about her first husband's survival, despite deep love for him, she decided to remain loyal to Janek, not least because he was the father of her only child, Natalia. Piotr, probably in order not to interfere with the couple's affairs, emigrated to the US, where he made a career as an ecologist.

Piotr visits Anna when attending as a guest of honour a conference in Kraków, devoted to ecological issues. He wants to discuss their private past and, even more (in line with the rule that in Jakubowska's films the history of a community takes precedence over the history of an individual), to learn about Anna's experience of incarceration in the concentration camp. For this purpose, Anna and Piotr travel to Auschwitz, where Anna reminisces on her time there, as well as to Sachsenhausen, where Piotr and Janek's father, an eminent professor, was imprisoned and executed. Her memories are presented in the form of flashbacks, which fill most of the screening's time.

Invitation thus takes the form of a travel cinema, in which travelling in space is a pretext for and the means of moving in time. As I argued elsewhere, such cinema is a specifically European phenomenon (see Mazierska and Rascaroli 2006), but in the vast majority of films conforming to this type it is the man who serves as a medium connecting the nation's past with its present. In Jakubowska's film, by contrast, only Anna's war history matters; Piotr's past, although heroic, is reduced to a couple of somewhat obscure sentences ('We were running after Rommel and then ran away from him') and is not enriched by any visual content, which would add validity to his words. The question thus arises how Anna uses her privilege to tell her history to Piotr and to us, the viewers. As Joland Lenard observes, Anna's attitude in this respect is somewhat inconsistent as, on the one hand, she insists on the need, even necessity to remember the times of the crematoria, but on the other, she claims that the experience of living in the concentration camp cannot be effectively conveyed, but has to remain private (see Lenard 1986: 14). In particular, foretelling Claude Lanzmann's disgust of any attempt to identify psychological explanations for the camp atrocities, she dismisses Piotr's interest in the psychology of the Nazi officer, who first saves the life of a Gypsy child, only later to throw the boy into a fire. In my opinion, this paradoxical attitude to history affords Anna an immense dignity and power; she comes across almost as a goddess who keeps a key to the gate of ultimate truth. Antonina Gordon-Górecka's restrained acting and her natural, regal dignity, adds to the impression that she knows and understands history like nobody else.

The impression of Anna's power and dignity is augmented by Jakubowska's portrayal of her heroine as devoid of any personal needs. She only wants what is best for the children she treats, her country and humanity at large; she does not care about her appearance nor any material possessions. Metaphorically speaking, her subjectivity is her objectivity. Even love is for her a matter of choosing a man with whom she could best serve others. This attitude awakens both admiration and envy. On the one hand, we see some older colleagues who try to get rid of her, due to perceiving her as an obstacle to their shadowy activities; on the other hand, younger doctors treat her as their mentor, even metaphorical mother. A sign of their admiration is offering Anna a lift in their cars. Hence, although she does not have a car, she comes across as very mobile and her journeys appear to be effortless. It is not difficult to guess that Anna stands for Jakubowska herself – Anna's values are similar to the director's values, as conveyed on and off screen.

But *Invitation* concerns not only Anna, but also her family, and especially her daughter Natalia, a woman in her thirties with two children and a well-meaning but ineffectual husband. Brought up in Poland free from wars and relatively prosperous, unlike her mother, Natalia does not know much and does not care about the wartime past. Moreover, in contrast to her mother, Natalia is governed by her personal passions, not her sense of duty. She is curious about life outside Poland,

likes adventure and shows little concern for others, including her own family. Her profession as a photographer epitomises her desire to travel and learn about foreign lands. We meet Natalia shortly after her return from Budapest. Excited, she tells her mother about her trip, boasting that she there made excellent photographs and earned a lot of money, but Anna shows little interest in her story, preoccupied with her own work and her wartime memories.

The ultimate sign of the precedence of Natalia's selfish desires over any social concerns is the fact that she decides to take advantage of Piotr's visit, asking him to send her an invitation to America. It should be added that in communist Poland such an invitation was a prerequisite to receive a passport and visa. Often those who wanted to emigrate strove for an invitation. Most likely, this is also the case of Natalia who, as we learn in the course of the narrative, does not hurry to return home, despite leaving in Poland her two children and husband, desperate to see her back.

It should be mentioned that the motif of Natalia's emigration can be regarded as an oblique reference to martial law in Poland, because this period, practically concurrent with Jakubowska's shooting of *Invitation*, caused mass migration of Poles, reaching over one million people. Choosing emigration at this time was an obvious sign of utter disappointment with the Polish government and Polish reality at large. From Natalia's desire to live in the US we can infer that Anna and Natalia not only differ in their lifestyles but also in their political views.

By showing Anna in an utterly sympathetic light, and portraying Natalia as selfish and reckless, Jakubowska not only reveals her utter solidarity with the war generation, but tacitly endorses the communist regime and criticises those who opposed it. However, unlike in Jakubowska's socialist realistic films, where the enemies of socialism were portrayed as utterly negative characters, Natalia is granted some sympathy by the filmmaker. It feels like Natalia's world is not Jakubowska's world, but she condones her or at least does not condemn her for her mistakes. She also suggests that Anna is not without blame for her daughter's departure, being preoccupied with her own duties and her past, and showing little interest in her daughter's affairs. Actually, Anna is more attached to a man whose birth she assisted in Auschwitz and who now works as a sheep farmer, than to her own daughter. Anna's blindness to her daughter's plight might be regarded as metaphorical for the communist authorities' disregard of the values and ideas of the younger generation.¹

Invitation, despite having at play two planes of action, wartime past and the present day in late-socialist Poland, comes across as a traditional, even old-fashioned film. This is because of the classical style of acting employed by the actors, especially Gordon-Górecka in the role of Anna, which harks back to her role in *The Last Stage*, the rather static camera, the dominance of the dialogue over the visuals, even in the part, set in the camps, the heavy-handed handling of the ideological messages of the film. By and large, *Invitation* demonstrates that Jakubowska not only failed to assimilate the various stylistic innovations that occurred in Polish cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, for example introduced by Krzysztof Kiesłowski (who was her student), but that near the end of her career, she returned to many elements of the style of socialist realism, a style, which as is widely known, leaves the viewer very little scope to construct his/her own version of the story. Thus, stylistically, *Invitation* cannot be regarded as a piece of 'feminist art'. At best, we can classify it as women's cinema as minor cinema: cinema that articulates women's concerns, but using 'major language', in this case the male language of mainstream film.² Nevertheless, I will not neglect *Invitation*'s significance, because by 'looking awry'³ at it, to use Slavoj Žižek's phrase, especially at Natalia's discourse, we can learn something of importance about women's frustrations and dreams in the period depicted by the director.

Unlike *Invitation*, *It's Me, Now*, was made by a young director. Before, Jadowska finished only one full-length feature film, *Dotknij mnie* (*Touch Me*, 2003), co-directed with Ewa Stankiewicz, and awarded at the main Polish festival of independent cinema in Gdynia. In Jadowska's own words, the main inspiration for *It's Me, Now* was an article in a women's magazine, which encouraged female readers, frustrated by their lack of time and space to take care of their own well-being, to pencil a date in a calendar, writing there, 'It's me, now' (see Jadowska 2008). However, unlike the magazines which address mostly women thwarted by the double burden

of job and domestic duties, Jadowska chooses as her main character a woman who despite being thirty years old, has neither a job nor children and appears to run away from home not because of the shortage of duties, but rather because of their deficit, and related to it boredom and emptiness. Another reason of her escape, hinted at both by Hanka and her boyfriend Paweł, is Hanka's disappointment with their relationship, which, again, might result from boredom. However, the precise reasons of her departure are not spelled out, either by Jadowska's heroine or anybody else: she leaves home without explaining to anybody the motives of her decision.

Jadowska's choice of her heroine brings both narrative and ideological advantages and disadvantages. The main disadvantage is the viewers' sense that Hanka is a spoilt individual, with whom it is difficult to sympathise. The main advantage is a chance to conjure up Hanka as an empty vessel, waiting to be filled by what she finds 'on the road'. Accordingly, Jadowska's heroine shows an appetite for adventure and a need to find out what she wants and whom she wants to be. Subsequently, she wanders from one small town or village to another, meeting various people: women, men, couples, each with their own modes of living and baggage of problems. At the same time, her boyfriend attempts to find her, approaching the police and contacting Hanka's best female friend. In the end, he visits a mortuary to find out whether the corpse of a young woman whose description matches Hanka, belongs to his girlfriend.

The question arises what does the journey give to the female traveller? In contrast to the bulk of reviewers, I will argue that quite a lot. First, it offers her adventures, including some dangerous ones and makes her aware about her attractiveness. On several occasions Hanka finds herself with men who show an immense appetite for sex with her. She also learns to appreciate female company. It is women who help her on the way, providing shelter and direction: her old girlfriend, a girl much younger than her, possibly a lesbian, who allows her into the empty house of her relatives, and a much older woman who gives her a lift and shares her experiences with her. Meaningfully, whilst male company puts Hanka (as well as female viewers of this film) off men, the women she meets make her better disposed towards men and facilitate her return home.

Moreover, for Hanka, travelling allows her the position of observer which, as one might guess, she could not afford in her previous life, locked in a claustrophobic apartment block and which, as feminist authors argue, is typically denied women in mainstream film. This position, in the further instance, allows Hanka to situate herself, metaphorically speaking, in changing decorations. This is because each person whom she meets not only tells her a different story but, by doing so, offers her a new scenario of her own life. For example, an older woman warns her that when she takes time off from her boyfriend, he might seek consolation first in conversation with and then in the arms of her best girlfriend. The couple who split up on their way on holiday suggest that if Hanka was not leaving her partner, there might grow hatred for each other, which would, sooner or later, erupt and destroy their relationship. Another couple makes Hanka realise how difficult is the position of a not so young woman who is both materially and emotionally dependant on her partner. Most importantly, she learns about various compromises, even lies and humiliations people are prepared to put up with, in order to be with somebody.

The rather grim image of Polish family and erotic life helps Hanka to reflect on her life with Paweł, making her realise that against the background of freaky, violent, promiscuous or simply pathetic males, her partner stands out as loving, loyal and normal man, and on her own position as one who has led a rather comfortable, if empty, life. The testimony of her realisation is her attempt to contact him. On the other hand, the stories people tell her and the situations which she observes act as a warning against what she might encounter in future. They also reveal Hanka's attraction to playing different roles, engaging in identity games: an affinity, in which she could not engage in her previous static and stable life. It should be mentioned here that in each new encounter Hanka is less shy to lie about herself. Travelling transforms this opaque and amorphous young woman into a self-conscious, even cunning actress, who uses her lack of distinct identity to her advantage, as a means to appropriate numerous false identities. Finally, her journey turns out to be an excellent way to exercise control over her apparently controlling boyfriend, because by embarking on her journey

Hanka also forces him to travel, both literally and metaphorically, by reconsidering their relationship.

All the stories which Hanka tells about herself concern her as a private person. Likewise, the questions which other people ask her, refer to her only as a private individual. This partly reflects the fleeting nature of her encounters; the fact that there is never enough time to enter into deeper discussions, but also mirrors the wider reality in which she operates, where people live solely as private individuals, not concerned about culture, politics or history, and interested in others only as potential partners for sex or, at best, as friends. Equally, among the people whom Jadowska's heroine meets we find nobody who reveals any sense of history, who wants to compare the present day with the past or possible future. All the characters appear to live in the present, focused on immediate satisfactions. Many of them, like Hanka, also like to tell stories about themselves, inventing new identities for the purpose of their meeting. However, as Jadowska shows, these identities do not last; typically even before Hanka leaves, their true (or simply different) identities are revealed, leading to the embarrassment of the story-tellers. The disparity between the real (or widely known) and invented identity testifies to people's disappointment with themselves and, in a wider sense, with the opportunities existing in Poland.

Needless to say that among the people Hanka meets on her way we do not find anybody like Jakubowska's Anna and her friends, namely somebody who feels acutely the burden of history and who lives for others. The idealists who were prepared not only to live, but also to die for other people, disappeared completely from the landscape. Interestingly, their absence is not discernible in the film. Only when watching *It's Me, Now* in the context of Polish films made before 1989, such as *Invitation*, are we able to register it.

However, we find in *It's Me, Now* a character whom we can regard as a metaphorical link between Jadowska's film and *Invitation* (as well as Jadowska's previous film, *Touch Me*): a woman in her fifties who offers hitchhiking Hanka a lift. She is played by Ewa Szykulska who was cast as Natalia in Jakubowska's film. It is not difficult to imagine that she is in fact Natalia, only twenty or so years older. She offers Hanka a handful of lessons and comments on her own life. Most importantly, she encourages her to strive for her own happiness and pleasure, and be independent by demonstrating that having one's own car is a better way to travel than to rely on the politeness of strangers. Superficially cynical and full of herself but in reality well-disposed and helpful, this woman comes across as the wisest and happiest person Hanka meets on her road. If we treat this woman as an older version of Natalia, then we should conclude that the decisions which she made in the 1980s and her whole approach to life were in due course validated. Not only did she achieve material success and mobility which she strove for, but proved to be able to communicate with the younger generation more effectively than her aloof mother.

It's Me, Now does not have a traditional narrative. It opens in the middle of events, in which Hanka first appears to be only a peripheral character: an accidental passenger on a bus, taking a group of school children on an excursion. Only gradually is Hanka's significance for the narrative revealed, as if she herself needed time and space to go out of the shadow and be able to assert her importance. The ending of the film is open: we learn that the corpse that Paweł came to identify does not belong to Hanka, but neither do we know whether the couple would be reconciled, although certainly Jadowska hints at this possibility. The events, represented by Jadowska, appear to be connected only by chronology, not causality. At the same time, as I argued, there is a certain logic to Hanka's encounters, as each one sheds a new light on her relationship with Paweł and which opens up a new possibility for her.

The loose, one can say, postmodern structure of the film, was noticed and extensively commented upon by the reviewers. Some critics regarded it as a sign of Jadowska's unwillingness to conform to the dominant way of making films in Poland, and thus of her independence and progressiveness (see Maniewski 2006). Others regarded it as a weakness of the director, her lack of professionalism and the shortage of important things to say, as suggested by such an opinion: 'We wait for when the film truly starts, but when it happens, the film is already finished' (Szczerba 2006: 14). As much as taken aback by the open structure of *It's Me, Now*, the reviewers were

puzzled by Hanka's lack of purpose and direction. 'What does she want?' they asked with exasperation. Her purposeless wandering was typically regarded as a sign of her immaturity; she was labelled a 'little girl', lost on the tangled postcommunist roads. The obvious conclusion of such an approach was that Hanka should grow up and return home. Reading these opinions I wondered if they would be the same if Jadowska's protagonist was male. I presume not: male wandering in cinema is typically regarded as a dignified and adult activity. No critic asks the characters in *Easy Rider* (1969) or even its male-centred Eastern European equivalents, such as the Student in Roman Polański's *Nóż w wodzie* (*Knife in the Water*, 1962) or males in Jan Svěrák's *Jízda* (*The Ride*, 1994), to grow up and return home.

I would repudiate these criticisms by saying that if *It's Me, Now* appears to be open and unfinished, it is because, as I previously argued, Hanka is 'unfinished'. The difficulty of deciphering her and the film does not result from Jadowska's hiding something of importance about her from the viewer, any particular wound or mystery, but that Hanka lacks anything worth concealing. She is postmodern in the sense of being only a surface, an empty shell waiting for its content. She does not know what she wants; it is easier for her to leave any given situation and move on, than to make any positive choice and stick to it. Yet this seemingly purposeless wandering seems to be necessary for the character who previously lived a rather dull and sheltered life, to experience freedom, learn about the world and gain a sense of identity. As we learn more and more about Hanka on each new stage of her journey, so she learns more about herself and the reality which surrounds her, as did before her numerous protagonists of road cinema. To put it differently, Hanka becomes somebody and being somebody was her goal, even if she was not able at first to articulate it. .

To summarise my paper, I will suggest that *Invitation* and *It's Me, Now* mark the development in Polish female travel cinema, from the heroine who is mature and 'finished' and, consequently, does not change during her trip, to one who is 'young' and opaque and undergoes transformation on the road; from a journey which has a distinct, well defined itinerary and leads to the character and the country's past to one which is chosen at random and leads to the future. This transformation can easily be mapped into the postwar history of Poland. It could even be suggested that in the respective films the female protagonists epitomise Poland itself at specific historical junctures: Poland which has lived for long, perhaps too long, in its past and Poland which forgot about its past and thinks only about its present and future. However, as far as I know, such a reading of the heroines was never proposed in the discourses on Polish cinema and most likely, would be contested by the bulk of critics and historians, all too willing, if not to throw these films into the bin, at best to place them in a footnote to the history of Polish cinema.

One can guess that the risk of disappearing from history by making films that are female-centred, challenging narrative expectations and ideologically ambiguous was recognised by Jadowska herself. A sign of this recognition is her currently working on a television series, *General* (*General*) about General Władysław Świerczewski, who during the Second World War was Prime Minister of the Polish government in exile. Although it would be risky, if not preposterous to suggest that Jadowska wanted to follow in Jakubowska's footsteps, it is not difficult to note that these female directors are similar in choosing to make films about well-known historical figures. Also, most likely, her *General* would attract more interest from the critics and ordinary viewers than *It's Me, Now*, which at best would enjoy an after-life at feminist conferences like this one.

Notes

¹During the 1980s those who participated in anti-communist demonstrations were labelled 'wyrastki', which is a contemptuous term for young people. Hence, political dissidence was equated with youth, and youth with immaturity, even childishness.

²Elżbieta Ostrowska and myself elaborated the concept of Polish women's cinema as minor cinema in our book *Women in Polish Cinema* (see Mazierska and Ostrowska 2006).

³It could be argued that 'looking awry' is the chief strategy of feminist researcher, trying to detect female discourse in mainstream film. A good example of this strategy is *Women in Film Noir* (see Kaplan 1998).

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