

Queers in Polish Film: From Legal but Diminished to Recast and Differentiated

Helena Goscilo, Harmony Fund

Abstract: A necessarily selective glance at queerness in Polish film from the interwar period to the 2020s reveals, unsurprisingly, increased explicitness in the depiction of onscreen queer personae during the last quarter-century after their virtual absence during the crime-ridden, macho 1990s. Examining crossdressing, homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, and transgender experiences, this overly compact survey focuses on the 21st century as it tracks the departure from the tired and tiresome identification of homosexuality with effeminacy, the comparative scarcity of films about lesbians, and the refreshing diversity in recent portrayals of queerness.

'Queer' not as being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.

bell hooks, "Are You Still a Slave?" (2014)

Defining Queer

Like Sara Ahmed (2006) and bell hooks, I conceive of queer as denoting a heterogeneous category of individuals who consciously or otherwise do not conform to mainstream social conventions, which traditionally exercise power through created norms. Accordingly, in the context of sexuality/gender, queerness comprises homosexuals (male gays and lesbians), bisexuals, transvestites/crossdressers, and transgender individuals/transsexuals.¹ Moreover, I subscribe in a modified form to Adrienne Rich's concept of a sexual continuum (1980) along which everyone may be located provisionally, some moving away from hetero to homo or the reverse, while others maintain a fixed position at either end of the spectrum or fluidly occupy more than one location on it simultaneously. These convictions inevitably underpin my selective glance at queerness in Polish films released primarily, though not exclusively, during the last quarter-century. Constraints of space and anticipated readers' (im)patience limit my commentary on earlier screen representations of queerness to several brief mentions. Anyone interested in that period who understands Polish, however, can consult Sebastian Jagielski's meticulously researched scholarly tome *Masquerades of Masculinity* (*Maskarady męskości*, 2013) and the journalist-activist Krzysztof Tomasik's popularizing *Gejereł: Sexual Minorities in PRL* (*Gejereł: Mniejszości seksualne w PRL-u*, 2018) and *Homolobby: Actors in the Second Polish*

Warm thanks to Bożenka and Sebastian for their responses to an earlier, uncorrected version of this report.

¹ For an elaboration of referential possibilities of the term "queer" see Doty 2000, 6-7.

© Helena Goscilo

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

<https://sqsjournal.org>

*Republic (Homolobby. Aktorzy II RP, 2025).*²

Pre-WWII, under Soviet Oversight, and the 90s

In 1932, Poland legalized homosexuality,³ which underwent decriminalization in the US from the sixties onward, in the UK in 1967, and as late as 1994 in West Germany. Regarding same-sex intimacy, France (1791), Holland (1811), and Italy (1890) proved three of the most enlightened nations in Western Europe, while Poland was decades ahead of other Slavic countries. As anyone familiar with the relationship between law and everyday experience knows, however, an abyss often yawns between the two. Views of queerness in Poland during the interwar period and especially the forty-odd years of its membership in the Eastern Bloc as the Polish People's Republic (PRL: Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, 1947–89) illustrate the discrepancy between paper legality and lived reality.⁴ And an appreciable disparity likewise characterized the portrayal of queerness in domestic feature films from one decade to the next.

The 1930s in Poland witnessed a lively symbiosis between film and cabaret—a genre of intimate entertainment originating in Paris (1881) that combined risqué innuendo, popular music, audacious costumes, and subversive topical satire.⁵ In cinema, the extraordinarily prolific and adaptive gay director Michał Waszyński (1904–65),⁶ famous for his many melodramas, comic actor Adolf Dymśa (1900–75), and especially screen/cabaret star Eugeniusz Bodo (1899–1943) became associated with (sometimes musical) comedies coalescing around a romantic plot that involved **crossdressing**—women



Figures 1-2. The indefatigable Eugeniusz Bodo with his beloved Sambo; Bodo in *The Floor Above* (*Piętro wyżej*) as the busty Mae West.

² The Second Polish Republic (II PR) was the interwar period, lasting from 1918-1939. Some useful comments also may be found in the chapter on Czech and Polish masculinity in Mazierska 2010, 177-213.

³ As elsewhere, the law addressed men's sexuality, not lesbianism.

⁴ For basic information about LGBT rights in Poland from the nineteenth century to the present, see <https://www.equaldex.com/region/poland>.

⁵ Beth Holmgren examines specifics of that synergy. For a somewhat gossipy and popularizing but informed and informative history of Polish cabaret from its earliest days, see Koper 2023.

⁶ Between 1929-39 he directed forty films, later worked in Italy, and participated in major American films. For a brief but invaluable essay on his life and works, see Kowalczyk 2022.

as boys or little girls and men as women (Holmgren 2023, 39–81). Most notably, in Leon Trystan’s musical comedy *The Floor Above* (*Piętro wyżej*, also known under the title *Neighbors*, 1937), Bodo, typically cast as an object of female desire (though in real life apparently preferring his dog and his mother to romantic dalliance), created a sensation singing a pioneering drag number titled “Sex Appeal” while dressed as Mae West (1893–1980) (figures 1, 2). As the epitome of flaunted hyperbolic female sexuality renowned for her audaciously *outré* witticisms (e.g., “A hard man is good to find,” “Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before”), West ignited a perception of her as part male, part female (queer) precisely because of her overripe enactment and articulation of sexually insatiable womanhood, which became her screen signature. She acquired the status of a gay icon, not unlike Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, both of whom wore male garb and crossed gender boundaries in their films,⁷ which, in contrast to West’s, largely eschewed humor.

Dietrich’s early career was in cabaret, and as the cabaret vamp Lola Lola in the musical drama *The Blue Angel* (*Der blaue Engel*, 1930; dir. Josef von Sternberg) she eventually caused a professor’s tragic demise. Luchino Visconti’s *Damned* (*La caduta degli dei*, 1969) linked the crossdressing Martin’s performance as cabaret-Dietrich to a weightier, historical tragedy—the 1930s rise of Nazism in Germany. Whereas intertextual crossdressing in Visconti augured dire events, transvestitism in Polish cinema of the 30s was playful and campy, appearing solely in comedies, though according to at least one source, queerness was a mode of style during the decade (Jagielski 2009, 223).⁸ Yet, though the endings of films that featured crossdressing may have reassured viewers that “all’s well that ends well,” the sheer presence of onscreen men in women’s clothing carried intimations of transgression that lingered. Conventional clothes, after all, serve to reinforce gender binarism (Garber 1992; Benstock and Ferriss 1994; Wilson 2014), and violation of established vestimentary codes—before unisex outfits appeared on the scene—court/ed speculation by implying **queerness** (Dyer 2002, 211–17).⁹

Onscreen crossdressing resurfaced four decades later, in Stanisław Bareja’s comedy *Looking for Man-Woman* (*Poszukiwany, poszukiwana*, 1972/1973), doubtless inspired by Billy Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (1959). Both deal with protagonists’ cross-dressed flight from reprisal in the context of crime. Whereas Wilder’s musicians Jerry aka ‘Daphne’ (Jack Lemmon) and Joe aka ‘Josephine’ (Tony Curtis) witness a Chicago mobster killing, Bareja’s museum worker Stanisław Maria Rochowicz aka ‘Marysia’ (Wojciech Pokora) is unjustly accused of theft and goes undercover (figure 3).¹⁰ All three spend much of the

⁷ Both women likewise favored an androgynous style offscreen.

⁸ Jagielski here is citing Czesław Miłosz. See footnote 42.

⁹ In his excellent article about cinematic queerness during the 30s, Jagielski speculates that the actor/director/producer was homosexual, given his bravura performance in this sequence, his reported use of makeup in everyday life, and his cohabitation with his mother, who remained the greatest love of his life (Jagielski 2012, 266–71). The sequence following the song “Sex Appeal,” in which Bodo as Henryk entices an older male neighbor who lives on the floor above him in the apartment house anticipates the Jerry (Jack Lemmon) plotline in Billy Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (1959).

¹⁰ About the difficulties of casting a man whose physique could credibly pass as a woman’s, see Skotarczak 2022, 129–37.



Figure 3. Richowicz as the domestic Marysia in Bareja's *Looking for Man-Woman* (*Poszukiwany-poszukiwana*).

two films masquerading as women, but whereas the memorable last line of Wilder's film, which teems with temporary adopted identities, suggests that 'Daphne' and his besotted older swain will share an intimate life in the future as a queer couple, the conclusion of Bareja's film reasserts a heteronormative status quo. Under ho-

mosocial Soviet supervision in the PRL even comedies had clearly defined heteronormative limits.

Apart from the maverick Bareja's gender-bender offering, postwar Polish films proved less ludic and sooner conceived of queerness in all its forms as a sociopsychological problem. That some of the most famous and respected Polish writers were **homosexual** nevertheless was a widely known fact that never interfered with their popularity, as evidenced by Maria Dąbrowska, Aniela Gruszecka, Jerzy Andrzejewski, Miron Białoszewski, Witold Gombrowicz, Jan Lechoń, and others. And Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, a married 'family man' with two daughters, decorated by the government for his sundry political services, was **bisexual**.¹¹ No one advertised her or his sexual proclivities, for, as Tomasz Basiuk argued recently, the ritual of coming out (*de rigueur* now in the West, especially Hollywood) was alien to Poles, as well as considered superfluous. In Poland, Basiuk observes, "Coming out is often seen as a cultural import, a gesture for which there is no established protocol and which can easily turn into embarrassment for those who attempt it and those being addressed" (Basiuk 2018, 5). Such a viewpoint, I believe, slights differences between generations and the seismic revolution in communication during the last few decades, as well as entertaining a narrow definition of what coming out entails. Contemporary directors (e.g., Tomasz Wasilewski, Olga Chajdas and Kasia Adamik—a married lesbian couple who enjoy the blessing of Agnieszka Holland, Adamik's mother), actors (Hubert Miłkowski, Piotr Trojan), and film commentators (Bartosz Żurawiecki),¹² neither hide their queerness nor make ritualistic public announcements. Earlier *Kulturarbeiters'* circumspection presented no obstacles either to public awareness of their

¹¹ For a discussion of literary queerness in the sexual and more general sense, see Hutchens 2022, the first chapter of which treats Iwaszkiewicz and Gombrowicz.

¹² A writer and journalist as well as film critic, Żurawiecki authored a book-length study of HIV in Poland, ironically titled *Ojczyzna moralnie czysta: Początki HIV w Polsce* (*The Fatherland Is Morally Pure: The Beginnings of HIV in Poland*), Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2023. In it he openly refers to his husband, Maciej Kucharski.

queerness or to their status within mainstream culture. Iwaszkiewicz's fiction, in fact, attracted many highly respected film directors, especially Andrzej Wajda, but also Jerzy Kawalerowicz, Stanisław Różewicz, and Jan Rybkowski, among others.

One of Poland's most popular and internationally successful films in the 70s, Wajda's *Promised Land* (*Ziemia obiecana*, 1975), stands out by virtue of an unambiguously **homosexual** character as one of its major personae. Wajda's vivid adaptation of Nobel laureate Władysław Reymont's novel (1899) with the same title dramatizes the ambitious activities of three male friends in the accelerated industrialization of Łódź, now Poland's cinema city, but then the heart of the country's textile production. Of the three—Polish nobleman Karol Borowiecki (Daniel Olbrychski), German business heir Max Baum (Andrzej Seweryn), and Jewish businessman Moritz Welt (Wojciech Pszoniak)—Borowiecki is the universal object of desire not



Figure 4. The political kiss as the realized metaphor of ideological bedfellows (2016), by street artist Mindaugas Bonanu, photograph by Petras Malukas/AFP/Getty Images.

only for three women but also for Welt. Throughout, the latter demonstrates no interest whatsoever in women, gazes spellbound at Borowiecki, carries his photograph in his wallet, and kisses him on the lips in a paroxysm of uncontrollable enthusiasm (predating Brezhnev and Honecker's socialist smooch, which was reprised in a contemporary masterpiece of wall art by Lithuanian Mindaugas Bonanu likewise literalizing the metaphor of "ideological bedfellows" in its depiction of Putin and Trump osculating!).¹³ (figure 4) Moreover, Wajda had Welt wear several gaudy rings and underscored his Jewishness, which, given the Jewish Lucy Zucker's relentless sexual appetite for Borowiecki, aligned Jewishness with sexual 'anomaly' in the film's system of values, doubtless accounting for various accusations of antisemitism against Wajda, especially in the West (figure 5).¹⁴ Additionally, not unlike other Polish directors who cast Olbrychski in swash-buckling roles (e.g., Jerzy Hoffman in *The Deluge* (*Potop*, 1974)), Wajda himself fetishized his protagonist's athletic body sufficiently for viewers to regard his treatment of Olbrychski/Borowiecki as queer.¹⁵

¹³ The original photograph of Brezhnev and Honecker inspired Dmitrii Vrubel's painting on a fragment of the Berlin Wall in 1990, which in turn apparently stirred the imagination of Bonanu in Vilnius. For the politics of the kiss in the contrasting context of queerness, see Baer 2009, 25. Not irrelevantly, a recent study headed by Matilda Brindle, an evolutionary biologist at Oxford University, confirmed that near-derthals osculated, as do albatrosses—a fact that might illuminate the habit of Soviet leaders (Watkins 2025).

¹⁴ For a discussion of Welt's and others' sexuality in the film, see Jagielski 2013, 268-308.

¹⁵ On the repeated exposure of Olbrychski's upper body, see Goscilo 2024, 237-69.

During late PRL, however, screen homosexuals were relatively scarce, though individuals whom some film critics have interpreted as queer in a broader sense were frequent, especially in secondary roles (Jagielski 2013, *passim*).¹⁶ Narratives about queers virtually vanished during the chaotic 90s, when guns as blatant phallic symbols overran Polish cinema, reflecting the economic freefall and social disorder that accompanied the country's convulsive transition to democracy and market. With criminality, corruption, and greed posited as the norm, Hollywood-cloned action films directed by Władysław Pasikowski (b. 1959) and Maciej Ślesicki (b. 1966) showcased rampant violence and an improbably macho protagonist (above all, Bogusław Linda) in features that acquired unexpected popularity even as cinema's audiences shrank dramatically. These misogynistic



Figure 5. Throughout *The Promised Land* (*Ziemia obiecana*) Welt changes rings several times, an atypical habit for men, who, moreover, may wear a wedding band or signet ring, but not three rings on one hand.

homosocial box-office hits (e.g., *Kroll* 1991, *Psy* 1992, *Psy 2* 1994; *Tato* 1995, *Sara* 1997) often portrayed young females as witless admirers of older men for whom lethal weapons mattered more than women in compensatory scenarios that cemented **gender binarism** with a vengeance. Onscreen dominance of assertive masculinity that drew sizable audiences left scant room for queer scenarios. Although the decade's end witnessed the release of an intelligent, pessimistic treatment of the decade's lawlessness—Krzysztof Krauze's *Debt* (*Dług*, 1999), based on real events—regrettably, it also adopted the 90s' addiction to ironclad gender binarism. In fact, the cover of Feliks Falk's *Debt Collector* (*Ko-mornik*, 2005), a thematic holdover from typical 90s fare, bore the label "Masculine / Men's

¹⁶ Together with Kalinowska (2009), Kurz (2009), and other Polish critics, Jagielski sees the eighties as a decade in which screen sexuality and nudity exploded. From today's perspective, that period's relaxation of censorship strikes me as rather tame.

Film" (*Męskie kino*), presumably as a selling point for the envisioned consumers of fantasies about salvatory macho omnipotence.

*The 21st Century: Queerness from Multiple Perspectives*¹⁷

Fortunately, the 21st century brought diversity and thoughtfulness to, as well as increased engagement with, the concept of queerness, elaborated by both female and male directors. Not so, however, in the first year, which witnessed the premiere at the Gdynia Film Festival of Mariusz Trelński's *Egoists* (*Egoiści*, 2000).¹⁸ One of the best-known and most contentious films that year, with a sensationalist scenario scripted by the director and two colleagues that depicted Varsovian elite's *dolce vita* (frenetic parties, drugs, booze, sex) during the unbridled nineties, it resorted to the musty cliché equating homosexuality with effeminacy and at film's end culminated in a "pansy's" suicide upon being abandoned by his lover.¹⁹ As



Figure 6. Trelński's bewildering regression to the stereotype of the homosexual Filip as effeminate and immature, if not downright infantile in *Egoists* (*Egoiści*).

Anita Piotrkowska phrased it, viewers witnessed cynical materialists "revelling in easy money and hedonistic debauchery" (2010, 122) in a testament to ill-judged efforts at novelty. A prominent, prize-winning and controversial opera, theater, and film director²⁰ whose commitment to originality misfired in *Egoists*, Trelński opted for an unmoored, operatic treatment of a stale stereotype, in which the

successful architect Filip (Jan Frycz), ditched by his young military lover, immolates

¹⁷ For an extended list of all films that contain personae who may be considered queer, however peripheral, see "We Have Gay People in Poland Too," <https://letterboxd.com/mumciur/list/we-have-gay-people-in-poland-too/>.

¹⁸ Gdynia is the northern city in which Poland's annual film festival takes place, with ceremonious awards for best film, best actress, etc. Until 1987, the event was held in Gdańsk.

¹⁹ Poland has fewer derogatory terms for male homosexuals than some other Slavic countries: *ciota*, *homoś*, *inwers*, *lala*, *pedał*, *pederasta*, *pedzio*. *Gej* and *kochający inaczej* (loving differently) are neutral.

²⁰ See Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim, "Mirror, Mirror," *The New York Times*, Jan. 21, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/25/arts/mariusz-trelinski-brings-iolanta-and-bluebeards-castle-to-the-met.html>.

himself in a melodramatic fire—moreover, wearing a corset and clutching a doll (figure 6)!²¹ Whereas Cio-Cio-San's suicide upon abandonment in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, which Treliński directed in several countries at that time, is convincing, the specifics of Filip's self-immolation in the operatically excessive *Egoists* render it lurid and laughable. Treliński's reliance on a similar though less extreme aesthetic in *Farewell to Autumn* (*Pożegnanie jesieni*, 1990), his earlier adaptation of the febrile novel (1925) by Polish modernism's *enfant terrible* Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939) likewise envisioned homosexuality reductively as an aspect of decadence, and decadence in the perception of many generally signals the erasure of caveats and boundaries in the enactment of so-called perversity.

After such an inauspicious start to the 2000s, the subsequent proliferation of Polish films about queers constituted a welcome antidote to trivialized portrayals insofar as both female and male directors placed queer protagonists at the very core of their narratives and attentively explored their experiences as individuals rather than near-caricatures. Two original, vastly different features, each a milestone in its own way, appeared just a few years after *Egoists*: Izabella Cywińska's *Lovers from Marona* (*Kochankowie z Marony*, 2005/6)²² and the prolific Piotr Matwiejczyk's indie short titled *Homo Father* (2005).²³ An adaptation of Iwaszkiewicz's autobiographical novella (1961), *Lovers from Marona* offers a credible (and creditable) psychological examination of a love triangle comprising a heterosexual female teacher (Ola [Karolina Gruszka]) in the provinces, a homosexual who regularly visits the area (Arek [Łukasz Simlat]), and the married bisexual object of their desire (Janek [Krzysztof Zawadzki])—a tubercular patient housed at the local sanatorium. Simultaneously evoking Shakespeare's comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, with two male friends as rivals for the same woman, and the “star-crossed lovers” Romeo and Juliet in Verona, both novella and film revise the gender of the beloved and replace Romeo's suicide with Janek's fatal disease. A theater director who briefly served as Poland's Minister of Culture (1989–91), Cywińska (1935–2023) opted for persuasive restraint, implication, and eloquent performances by the cast to convey romantic love as *Liebestod* (the two equally powerful forces according to Ola) while registering the psychological complexity of the focal trio.²⁴ Although the two men's intimacy belongs to their past, Arek's inability to stay away from Janek, their physical gestures, and Arek's integration into Janek's family convey the strength of their evolving intimacy (figure 7). As Janek remarks,

²¹ The corset as a marker of homosexuality likewise was worn by Frycz as Jerzy Wawicki in Andrzej Barański's earlier film, *Horror in Wesole Bagnisko* (*Horror w Wesolych Bagniskach*, 1995/6). See Jagielski 2009, 219, ft. 24.

²² An earlier screen version of the novella, by Jerzy Zarzycki, appeared in 1966.

²³ The title evokes Max Frisch's German novel *Homo Faber* (1957), which also investigates identity and paternity, as well as moral responsibility for one's decisions. The independent director Matwiejczyk (b. 1980) specializes in shorts that tackle a wide range of social and psychological issues. For a catalogue of his films, see <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?osoba=1143753>.

²⁴ For a lengthier analysis of the film, see Goscilo and Holmgren 2021, 265–68.



Figure 7. Rhyming names in *Lovers from Marona* (*Kochankowie z Marony*) underscore what the film's narrative implies—that, Janek's wife and his recent heterosexual liaison notwithstanding, past lovers Janek and Arek are bonded

aura of the film, which parallels death in nature, the animal kingdom, and humanity, increases as the narrative proceeds, love binds all three major personae in sequences that emphasize the emotional rewards of profound feelings and commitment to others. And gay love unquestionably carries a positive valency, no less significant than its hetero variant. A comparison of Cywińska's film with the 1966 version by Jerzy Zarzycki, which omits all references to same-sex love, indexes just how attitudes toward homosexuality in Poland continued to change over decades, as accurately observed by Ewa Mazierska (2010, 207).

Contrastively and unapologetically explicit in its portrayal of two gay lovers with a child, Matwiejczyk's 58-minute *Homo Father* nonetheless resembles Cywińska's film in three respects: its psychological orientation, its envisioned fluidity of sexuality, and its inclusion of a woman alongside the male couple (figure 8). Whereas in Cywińska's scenario Ola is Janek's new love interest, in *Homo Father*, Natalia (Goria Kornyluk) belongs to Gabriel's (Bodo Kox) past. Three years earlier their one-night stand resulted in a daughter, Amelia (Amelia Matwiejczyk), of whose existence he has no knowledge until forced to parent her temporarily with his lover, Robert (Dawid Antkowiak), when Natalia leaves the child with them and disappears for three months. Not the

"He always comes back... comes back to me." And when Janek feverishly fantasizes about a bright future shortly before his death he first mentions Arek, then Basia, his wife. Ola and Janek's explicit bodily intimacy, which originally suggests a future, appears to hasten Janek's death, inasmuch as it soon follows their sexual intercourse. Janek seems to love everyone but possibly no one, presumably including his wife and son—essentially hearsay characters whose future wellbeing he entrusts to Arek. While the elegiac

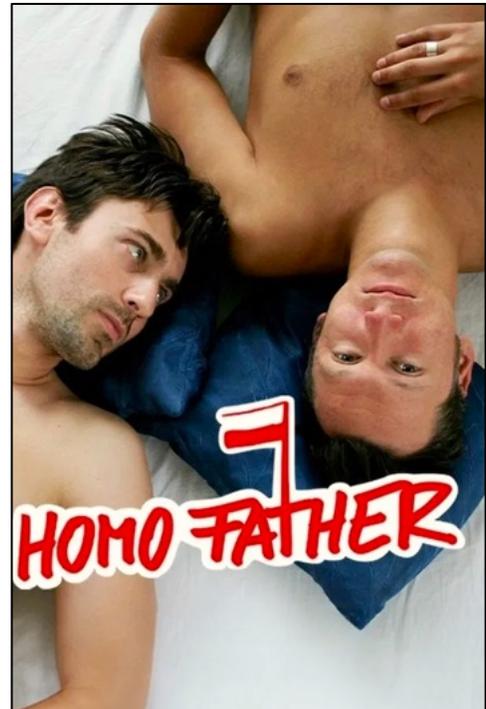


Figure 8. *Homo Father* DVD cover, which accurately reflects the two lovers' contrasting perspectives.

child, but conflicting attitudes toward making their relationship known to the outside world is the crux of the male couple's dilemma and the film's plot. Basically, *Homo Father* confronts a key issue in queer culture that Basiuk downplays: maintaining privacy (Robert) versus public disclosure (Gabriel). The two men's dissimilar personalities determine their preferences: unemployed, domestic Gabriel is garrulous, emotional, and outgoing, whereas fear of discovery renders the professionally ambitious Robert reticent and undemonstrative. Although aspects of Gabriel's appearance and activities align him with standard notions of womanhood (long hair, cooking, frequent talk about feelings, etc.), in fact, his is an integrated nature that embraces irony and is completely comfortable with being gay.

Matwiejczyk has the sense and sensibility to portray the male duo as simply likable, caring men whose notion of homosexuality fundamentally diverges: for Gabriel, love is paramount, whereas Robert internalizes the heteronormative view of gayness as 'abnormal'—a mechanism the film neatly conveys through repeated shots of Robert gazing at his reflection in a mirror as he adjusts the tie that is part of his formal wear at work throughout the film. After two homophobic neighborhood neanderthals beat up Gabriel and he lands in hospital, Natalia collects Amelia. Once a changed and chastened Robert declares his love at Gabriel's bedside and confesses to the fear of 'outing,' they return home, whereupon the film concludes with an inspired shot: Gabriel pulls at the netting that earlier he had placed over the door to discourage flies, and as it lands over his head when the two men kiss, it serves as an informal wedding veil. In short, as Gabriel argues throughout, *omnia vincit amor*,²⁵ be it straight or gay (figure 9).



Figure 9. Finally in complete harmony as they return home, Gabriel and Robert symbolically enjoy a "marriage of true minds" (*Homo Father*).

Just how attitudes toward homosexuality in Poland had evolved by the 2000s also may be deduced from *Homo Father's* Independent Film Award at the country's annual film festival in Gdynia (2005) and from Robert Gliński's HBO-produced documentary *Homo.pl* (2007), in which gays speak frankly about their lives.²⁶ With each passing year, Polish films about queers not only became bolder but also shifted emphases and acquired greater intricacy, nuance, and varied contexts. With a few exceptions, notions of

²⁵ The words are Virgil's, but they express Gabriel's conviction.

²⁶ In her coverage of Gliński's life and works, including a filmography, Małgorzata Fiejdasz makes no mention of the documentary. See culture.pl, 2007/2011, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/robert-glinski>.

effeminacy and abnormality ossified into relics of the past.²⁷ Illustrative of this trend, Magdalena Piekorz's portmanteau *Torpor/Drowsiness* (*Senność*, 2008) marked a huge leap forward. Juxtaposing two gay men's love with two mainstream marriages, the film fear-



Figure 10. While seemingly a ruffian like his gang of street mates, the skillful skateboarder Bystry proves a loving partner with Adam in the privacy of the latter's apartment—and bed—in *Torpor/Drowsiness* (*Senność*).

lessly presents the former relationship in an unequivocally more favorable light. Piekorz raises pragmatism, class issues, and the familiar contrast between town and country, but, above all, lays to rest the thoughtless equation of homosexuality with effeminacy in the persona of Bystry (Bartosz Obuchowicz)—a skateboarding member of a 'rough and tough' street gang who falls in love with Adam (Rafał

Maćkowiak), the young doctor who treats his injuries. After a brutal beating by his thuggish 'buddies,' Bystry happily joins Adam in a move to the countryside next door to the latter's parents. Hardly a proponent of sexual utopianism, Piekorz shows the lovers forced to negotiate the contemptuous enmity of Adam's father (Andrzej Grabowski) while, as usual, the mother (Dorota Pomykała) shows greater acceptance. Yet the men are united in a mutual love absent from the heterosexual marriages that the film depicts in somewhat exaggerated scenarios bordering on parody of noxious heteronormative couplings.

Torpor/Drowsiness demonstrates originality in two sequences formerly unthinkable in Polish film: in the first, when Adam returns late to his apartment and joins Bystry in bed, the camera focuses on the two men sleeping intertwined (figure 10), while the second sequence contains a brief shot of Bystry's frontal nudity when Adam opens his apartment door to see his father standing outside in an unannounced visit.²⁸ Within the context of both European and American film (pornography excepted), male frontal nudity in a sustained shot appears extremely rarely, and its occurrence here constitutes a cinematic landmark.²⁹ Moreover, the film does not flinch from exposing ignorant prejudice toward gayness from two sources—social circles and the family, with the first threatening physical harm, the second imposing psychological pressure. The couple's commitment in the

²⁷ In that respect Marek Kotowski's prize-winning comedy *Dzien świra* (*Day of the Wacko*, 2002) proved regressive.

²⁸ Additional commentary on the film may be found in Goscilo and Holmgren 2021, 268-70.

²⁹ Though not prolonged, the shot is long by comparison with fleeting glimpses of male genitals in films during PRL and later. Moreover, Bystry stands motionless, making no effort to shield his lower body, but faces both Adam's father and the viewer.

face of two-pronged adversity demonstrates their quiet stoicism, which the film acknowledges without positing an unalloyedly happy ending to their future life together.

Three years later Jan Komasa's *sui generis* solo screen debut, *Suicide Room* (*Sala samobójców*, 2011), offered an unexpected take on queerness that depicted (in a dark vein that in retrospect seems prescient) the young generation's wholesale embrace of the historical advances in technology, especially social media (figure 11). Although the film's overriding concern is the power of peer pressure and the internet, the starting point of the narrative, which moves to a tragic conclusion, is the suspected queerness of a young student, Dominik (Jakub Gierszal), who during a wrestling session with a classmate in the school gym manifests physical arousal. Hounded and ridiculed by his fellow students on social media, he retreats to a cyberworld where he encounters a chatroom administered by the young woman Sylwia (Roma Gąsiorowska-Żurawska) for the suicidally inclined and, ultimately, commits suicide, to his neglectful parents' shocked incomprehension. With a bravura performance by Gierszal in an early role, the film suggests, if only briefly, how in a heteronormative milieu gayness can elicit social ridicule or ostracism that eventually culminates in radical and fatal actions. The novelty of the film's social and psychological perspective, however, primarily concerns the expansion of the internet and, more generally, failure at genuine human communication, with queerness partly relegated



Figures 11 and 12. An extended shot captures the young generation's addiction to the internet, especially social media, which eventually results in tragic consequences. And Dominik's physical appearance externalizes his alienation from his classmates. Both in *The Suicide Room* (*Sala samobójców*).

to the subordinate function of plot generator, diminishing after the initial part of the film. Those early sequences nonetheless establish the ultimately destructive repercussions of appearing queer within an intolerant youth culture (figure 12).³⁰

Debatably, Polish screen queerness reached its apogee in what remains, without question, one of the two most intrepid and uncompromising treatments of the topic, both by Małgorzata Szumowska. The first is *In the Name of...* (*W imię...*, 2013), which took the unprecedented step of exploring homosexuality within the Catholic Church—historically, the holiest of holies in Poland. A pioneer in this regard, the film predated Wojciech Smarzowski's *Clergy* (*Kler*, 2018), a naturalistic one-note exposé of Catholic priests' sexual abuse of children, and Tomasz Sekielski's documentary titled *Tell No One* (*Tylko nie mów nikomu*, 2019) about the same phenomenon. While registering the Church's tradition of concealing "errant" priests' peccadillos by transferring them from one location to another, Szumowska has two weightier goals—to decry Catholicism's irrational and inhumane insistence on priests' and nuns' celibacy, and to differentiate between two modes of gay sexual praxis.

These concerns and all events in the film revolve around the charismatic priest Adam (Andrzej Chyra), redirected to the provinces because of his homosexuality, where he takes over a parish and supervises the successful center for maladjusted youth that he founded. Popular among its members, he responds positively yet circumspectly to the pursuit of a local young man, Łukasz aka Dynia (Mateusz Kościukiewicz). After a report to a bishop by the husband (Łukasz Simlat) of a frustrated woman, Ewa (Maja Ostaszewska), who unsuccessfully attempts to seduce Adam, however, the priest is sent to yet another parish. When Dynia follows him, Adam succumbs, and the two spend the night together. After an unspecified temporal lapse, the film ends with a silent sequence showing Dynia in liturgical vestments as one of several priests in conversation outside a church (figure 13).

Szumowska's film is remarkable on several fronts, arguably the most original being the analogy between Adam and sundry religious figures, including Jesus Christ: Adam struggles against his homosexuality, just as religious texts narrate Christ's difficulties with his mandated role of self-sacrificing redeemer; like Christ, he devotes himself to 'saving,' inter alia, not only those marginalized by society but also the physically incapacitated; and in Dynia, he finds the disciple who follows his precepts. Furthermore, the sequence in which Adam acquiesces to Dynia's request that he teach him to swim resembles a baptism (figure 14). Finally, Szumowska takes pains to portray Adam as an agent of love by contrasting, on the one hand, his final intimacy with Dynia in a remarkable shot of what constitutes smiling, face-to-face, 'heart-shaped' unity the morning after, to, on the other hand, the mere act of buggery when the cold-blooded Adrian/Blondyn (Tomasz Schuchardt) penetrates another youth, the latter's face unseen. In short, through cinematographic antithetical juxtaposition Szumowska showcases religious principles by

³⁰ Komasa's subsequent *Hater* (*Sala samobójców: Hejter*, 2020) further explored the nefarious misuse of the internet to disseminate misinformation, unleash hatred and violence, and ruin people's lives, with gayness a minor aspect of the film. For the director's interview about the film, see Jan Komasa, "Banalność zła," *Kino 4* (2020): 22–24 [Interview with Jakub Moryc].

affirming the power of love versus the alienation of lust. Not queerness, but instrumentalizing others for one's own ends receives short shrift in a film that could hardly present its central gay persona more appealingly—a role that the director cleverly entrusted to one of Poland's most popular, talented, and versatile actors.³¹

Anyone automatically assuming that only male queers are capable of portraying homosexual men knowledgeably and in an equitable fashion would benefit from comparing Cywińska's and Szumowska's films with Tomasz Wasilewski's *Floating Skyscrapers* (*Płynące wieżowce*, 2013), which he inaccurately proclaimed the first film to address gay



issues “seriously.” A retrograde and formulaic outing, it teems with the clichés that Jack Cullen catalogued in *The Guardian* after attending the BFI festival of gay shorts that year.³² Wasilewski's subsequent Polish-Swiss production, *United States of Love* (*Zjednoczone stany miłości*, 2016), its various awards notwithstanding, performed a similarly hapless (and misogynistic) operation on female desire, whereby women emerge as pathetic slaves to unrequited love—both hetero and homo, in which shots of naked bodies repeatedly and for the most part gratuitously expose (especially but not exclusively) male buttocks and genitals. These, presumably, were intended to signal enlightened daring even as the film's notions of womanhood evoked the medieval era. A diminished view of humanity

At film's conclusion, Dynia's choice of calling reflects Adam's impact on him as the disciple who may continue Adam's work; Szumowska casts a requested swimming lesson as a symbolic baptism (*In the Name of ... [W imię ...]*).

³¹ For a lengthier examination of the film, see Goscilo and Holmgren 2021, 271-73.

³² More about Cullen's commentary and a discussion of Wasilewski's film may be found in Goscilo and Holmgren 2021, 273-75.

blights the film, which would have benefited from the omission of the brief, risibly unconvincing lesbian element.³³

While in the 21st century women directed two of the best features about male gays, onscreen **lesbians** attracted few directors, either male or female. Two settings that conventionally ‘naturalize’ gay relations are prisons and sports facilities, where common showers reveal naked bodies and potentially conduce to sexual interaction. Yet *The Last Stage* (*Ostatni etap*, 1948) by Wanda Jakubowska, set in the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp during WWII, displayed women’s solidarity under calamitous conditions, but not mutual erotic attraction. Similarly, almost four decades later Ryszard Bugajski’s *Interrogation* (*Przestuchanie*, 1982), despite kissing between female prisoners, lacked sustained queer intimacy. Interestingly, the same year saw the famous Polish actress Grażyna Szapołowska (b. 1953)—repeatedly cast as an object of sexual desire³⁴—in the major role of the married journalist Livia involved in a queer liaison, but the film was Károly Makk’s Hungarian *Another Way* (*Egymásra nézve*). A year later in a sense Szapołowska reprised that role by playing a sadistic lesbian prison warden in Wiesław Siniawski’s *Custody* (*Nadzór*, 1983/5), which left no doubts about her sexual orientation, but eschewed explicitness. Increased screen sexuality during Poland’s 1980s generally favored its hetero variant.

More recently, several Polish commentators interpreted Agnieszka Smoczyńska’s short *Aria Diva* (2007) in terms of lesbianism, whereas some of us view it not as a literal dramatization of two women’s sexual intimacy but as a metaphorical rumination on two diametrically opposed options for adult women’s self-fulfillment: maternity versus career.³⁵ Nonetheless, the women’s fleeting but intense bond with each other certainly may be read as queer, especially by anyone disappointed in the paucity of films devoted to full-fledged lesbianism and eager to see hints of it onscreen. And whereas features generally tended to bypass female same-sex love, two documentaries during the second decade of the 21st century gave Polish lesbians voice: Magda Westub’s *Yes, We Are* (2010), and *Coming Out Polish Style* (*Coming Out po polsku*, 2011, dirs.



Figure 15. An insightful and committed professional, the lesbian Jass outshines her colleagues in the complex serial *Mire* (*Rojst*).

³³ For a deservedly crushing, informative review of the film, see Zoe Aiано, “United States of Misery,” *East European Film Bulletin*, 66 (Summer 2016), <https://eeff.org/perspectives/tomasz-wasilewskis-united-states-of-love-zjednoczone-stany-milosci-2016/>.

³⁴ Szapołowska’s ripe beauty led to her roles as a sexual magnet in Filip Bajon’s *Magnate* (*Magnat*, 1986) and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s *Short Film about Love* (*Krótki film o miłości*, 1988) among numerous other films.

³⁵ Goscilo and Albarano 2026, 93-95; Wodzyński 2025, 52-59.

Sławomir Grünberg and Katka Reszke)—significantly, made for PBS TV, but financially supported by PISF (Polish Film Institute/Polski Instytut Sztuki Filmowej).³⁶

The second and third seasons of Jan Holoubek's complex three-part crime thriller *The Mire* (*Rojst*, 2018–24) on Netflix,³⁷ true to his avowed preference for women's roles, star an intelligent female investigator, Anna Jass (Magdalena Rózczyńska), whose professionalism and integrity put her male colleagues in the shade.³⁸ Her lesbianism, which



Figures 16 and 17. The mismatched heterosexual couple seeking a surrogate birth mother; Nina, who discovers a new world of entertainment (and sexual possibilities), with Magda in a nightclub for queers. Both in *Nina*.

Nina cannot conceive (figure 16). With surprising speed Magda, who becomes enamored of Nina, woos her, takes her to a nightclub (figure 17), and the two grow intimate,

the series wisely treats as unexceptional, is at best incidental to the plot, which focuses on crime and Jass's relations with her colleagues, not her romantic/sexual interest (figure 15). A radically different treatment of lesbianism, however, finally premiered the year of *The Mire*'s debut: Olga Chajdas's risky *Nina* (2018), a no-holds-barred paean to lesbian love, which belongs to the small number of narratives marking a protagonist's movement or 'defection' from heterosexual intimacy to a partner of the same sex.³⁹ Although such a transition occurs frequently enough in everyday reality to predispose viewers to accept its representation on screen, several aspects of *Nina* militate against the persuasiveness of Chajdas's scenario. Its triangle consists of Nina (Julia Kijowska), a teacher of French, her car-mechanic husband, Wojtek (Andrzej Konopka), and the young Magda (Eliza Rębec), a lesbian airport worker with an active sex life, whom the couple choose as a surrogate birth-mother for their child when it transpires that

³⁶ Additionally, Jan Kidawa-Błonski's *In Hiding* (*W ukryciu*, 2013) portrays the queer relationship between a young Polish woman, Janina, and the Jewish Ester, whom she hides from the Nazis during WWII and in the process falls in love with her. Not having seen the film in its entirety, I am omitting discussion of it.

³⁷ Available on Netflix, the critically acclaimed series comprises *The Mire* (2018), *The Mire '97* (2021), and *The Mire: Millennium* (2023–24).

³⁸ See the interview with Holoubek, which revolves around *The Mire* (Holoubek 2021, 33).

³⁹ To varying degrees, these include *Lovers from Marona*, *Homo Father*, and *Operation Hyacinth*.

discussing their relations in a bathtub sequence (pioneered in *Homo Father*) before one of Magda's former lovers interrupts the idyll, prompting Nina to flee. After a distraught Magda becomes drunk at a bar and is taken home by Wojtek, they have sexual intercourse. Subsequently Nina (accompanied by Wojtek) at her sister's wedding celebration suddenly realizes that, after all, she wishes to spend her life with Magda, whom she joins. Presumably, the two women will raise the baby Magda now carries. As in *Homo Father*, the closing scene suggests happy 'togetherness,' presupposing that Magda's amorous past will not affect the couple's future.

Problems with the film concern not lesbianism but inadequate editing and at least two unconvincing sequences: Nina's so-called work in the classroom, where she has no rapport whatsoever with her students and seems completely disinterested in teaching; and the couple's evening with Magda at their house, during which they try to persuade her to undertake the surrogacy by smoking dope with her (!). Moreover, nothing seems to underpin Nina's marriage to Wojtek, who takes care of household tasks and wishes to please her, but to whom she seems indifferent—as she does to much else, which makes one wonder what draws Magda to her. Some skillful cinematography by Tomasz Naumiuk, especially in color-saturated sequences of the two women's increasing mutual attraction signaled by effective *mise en scène*, do not fully compensate for *Nina's* disappointing flaws. At the same time, as the first contemporary full feature to place lesbianism at its center, the film was an important milestone especially commendable for avoiding the tiresome butch-and-femme formula.⁴⁰

The 2020s

With the sweeping victory in the 2015 elections of Poland's right-wing political party, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość/PiS), its conservative agenda and close ties with the Catholic Church eventually resulted in the establishment of LGBTQ-free zones (*strefy*). While this homophobic rejection of LGBTQ rights in many regions carried no legal weight, the intolerance reflected attitudes of the government, the church, and a sizable portion of the provincial and rural population.⁴¹ Yet the campaign did not interfere with an increasing number of films sympathetic to queerness that starred popular actors, received positive reviews and/or awards, and reached international audiences. Netflix not only signed a special agreement with Poland (2016) and opened an office in Warsaw (2022), but began streaming Polish serials such as Piotr Domalewski's adolescent crowd-pleaser *Sexify* (2021–23) and offerings with queer content, such as Komasa's *Hater* (*Hejter*, 2020), Domalewski's *Operation Hyacinth* (*Hiacynt*), and Łukasz Kośmicki's *Queen* (*Królowa*). Similarly, Amazon made Łukasz Ronduda's *All Our Fears* (*Wszystkie nasze strachy*, 2021), *Queen*, and Kamil Krawczycki's *Elephant* (*Słoń*) accessible on Prime Video. And

⁴⁰ For more on the film, see Goscilo and Albarano 2026, 256-63, 282-83.

⁴¹ After the liberal opposition won the parliamentary elections in 2023, the zones were gradually abolished, a process completed by April 2025.

both *All Our Fears* and *The Suicide Room* appear on the free site Tubi. In other words, Polish onscreen queerness has joined an international community of directors relying on English subtitles (the current lingua franca) to reach huge audiences worldwide.

Winner of the Gdynia Film Festival's Golden Lion for best film of the year and four other awards, Łukasz Ronduda's *All Our Fears* (2021) features an extended episode in the life of the gay Polish artist Daniel Rycharski (b. 1986). A profoundly religious Catholic homosexual activist residing in a small village, Ronduda's Rycharski (Dawid Ogrodnik) sports ostentatiously bleached hair, a tracksuit with a rainbow trim that advertises his gayness, lives with his grandmother (Maria Maj), rides a motorcycle, and agitates for better conditions



Figures 18 and 19. Rycharski and his closeted lover, Olek, kiss in a recasting of the Garden of Eden, which, evoking the Biblical narrative, Jagoda's death transforms into a locus of mortality; in a sequence intended to underscore their emotional intimacy, Rycharski colors his grandmother's hair, unwittingly recalling the stereotype of the gay hairdresser. Both in *All Our Fears* (*Wszystkie nasze strachy*).

for workers in the area. Much of his art, some of it exhibited in Warsaw, is grounded in the realia of the local community. The focal incident that the film elaborates is the suicide of Jagoda (Agata Łabno), a lesbian friend who, hounded by a trio of local homophobes while out cycling, hangs herself from a tree. Her suicide inspires guilt in Rycharski and the desire to turn the community's attention to the tragedy of her early death and expiate his and everyone's guilt in her suicide. In Rycharski Ronduda created a fearless artist, whom the film's initial sequence shows having intercourse with his timorous lover, Olek (Oskar Rybaczek), in a setting originally resembling the Garden of Eden (figure 18). As a charismatic near-saint, Rycharski duplicates Christ's role by following the Way of the Cross—carrying along Warsaw's streets the cross he has fashioned from a local tree to commemorate Jagoda's "Passion." He loves his supportive grandmother (figure 19), his friends, and seemingly all aspects of Catholicism; with time his compassionate artistic

creations show promise in swaying the local population to tolerate LGBTQ individuals. At film's conclusion his timid lover joins him once more amidst nature, presumably having vanquished his fear of being outed. Since action rather than identity is Rycharski's *modus vivendi*, he incarnates Jean Paul Sartre's concept of existentialism, whereby existence precedes essence.

To some extent the film evokes *In the Name of...* and joins the later *Elephant* and lesser efforts in depicting homophobic rural aggression. What distinguishes it is the role of artistic creation as a means of honoring victims of cowardly hatred of queers. With that said, Ronduda's attempts to cover all aspects of Rycharski's life result in structural weaknesses: not so much the artist as the director abandons the topic of activism on the farmers' behalf; the small role of Rycharski's father (Andrzej Chyra),⁴² whom the artist visits several times but who ignores him until toward film's end when he suddenly and unconvincingly beats his son in the face, makes for incoherence; and Jagoda appears in the film so briefly as to verge on a hearsay character. In a basically laudatory review, Camillo De Marco puzzlingly declared, "The two directors give a fluidity and rhythm to the dramatic events that were not easy to find, even if in certain dialogues the complexity bends to excessive didacticism" (De Marco 2022). Fluidity, however, is precisely what the film lacks. One of its chief assets, nonetheless, is the camerawork by cinematographer Łukasz Gutt, sometimes listed as co-director, which splendidly captures the landscape, especially in nocturnal shots.⁴³ The other praiseworthy feature is the rich paronomasia of the title. *Strachy* is the Polish word for fears, and the film simultaneously depicts gays' fears of detection by homophobes (the cases of Jagoda and Olek), on the one hand, and, on the other, fears of those rendered insecure by alternatives to heteronormative constructs. A third meaning derives from Rycharski's metamorphosis of Jagoda's casual jacket, brought to him by Jagoda's formerly inimical mother, which he wraps around the cross carved in her memory and positions in a field. The result functions as an agricultural scarecrow (*strach na wróbli*), the plural *strachy* (also meaning "ghosts") referencing the many similar "scarecrows" that subsequently arise around his original. In short, Rycharski not only is joined by his lover at film's end, but has transformed the landscape of the village and some of its inhabitants' views of queers.⁴⁴

Ronduda's is not the sole film about gays drawing on Polish reality. Based on the official "Hyacinth" campaign by Polish authorities in 1985–87 to flush out all homosexuals in the country, presumably to blackmail them when expedient to do so, Domalewski's *Operation Hyacinth* (2021) recreates the unforeseen effects of that operation on the life of a young Warsaw policeman, Robert Mrozowski (Tomasz Ziętek).⁴⁵ Gratifyingly more complex than most of the films considered here, *Operation Hyacinth* seamlessly interweaves the state's political corruption and family dynamics into the focal drama of Robert's

⁴² Chyra, of course, was the gay priest in Szumowska's film, but here he does little other than glower and physically batter his son, who embraces him.

⁴³ At Gdynia he deservedly received the major award for cinematography.

⁴⁴ For a panegyric to the film, see Bartosz Stszczyżyn, "Fears – Łukasz Ronduda & Łukasz Gutt," *culture.pl*, March 3, 2022, <https://culture.pl/en/work/fears-lukasz-ronduda-lukasz-gutt>.

⁴⁵ For an analysis of the film as an instance of recent neo noir, see Goscilo 2026, 99-125.

unexpected sexual *volte face*. While raiding a ‘notorious’ venue for gay contacts during an investigation into serial murders targeting gay men, Robert encounters the student Arek (Hubert Miłkowski). He responds to the latter’s friendliness, initially to infiltrate the local gay scene, but soon begins to appreciate Arek’s considerable charm even as developments in the investigation reveal the duplicity of the police and higher-ups (figure 20). These include his well-positioned father, Edward Mrozowski (Marek Kalita), possibly blackmailing the closeted dignitary (Jacek Poniedziałek) who, it turns out, ordered the killings under investigation to elude discovery of his sexual proclivities. After a night spent with Arek, Robert seeks to warn him of the hired killer’s intention to eliminate all past attendees of gay gatherings at a local mansion who could reveal the dignitary’s participation. In the final sequence Robert manages to eliminate the hitman, to the sound of police sirens in the background that foreshadow his arrest, even as he persuades Arek to flee and promises to find him.



Figures 20 and 21. Robert and Arek at the wharf, their customary meeting place and where they part at film’s end. As a locus of constant arrivals and departures, the location symbolizes the social instability of their genuine emotional/sexual bonding. | When Robert in his professional capacity is forced to interrogate Arek under his judgmental father’s gaze, Arek steadfastly refuses to name anyone, including Robert, as a gay partner. Both in *Operation Hyacinth* (*Hiacynt*).

despite their uneasiness about being outed; and Arek, who seems utterly fearless and,

Especially rewarding—apart from uniformly excellent acting and outstanding cinematography by Piotr Sobociński Jr—are the film’s six different yet interconnected takes on queerness, five of which identify men with full knowledge of their sexuality: the middle-aged dignitary whose power enables him to dispose of those who could disclose his sexual praxis; the vulnerable married professor (Adam Cywka), who opts to commit suicide so as to avoid the ‘shame’ of revelation and, probably, loss of job; the random individuals interviewed by the police—determined to identify the killer, presumed to be gay, and using interrogation tactics evocative of McCarthyism; the group of gay students who gather at a party in Arek’s apartment to celebrate their friendship,

like Gabriel in *Homo Father*, comfortable with his sexuality (figure 21). Finally, the sixth is Robert, who in all good faith plans to marry Halinka (Adrianna Chlebicka), the record-keeper at the police station with whom he has (seemingly enjoyable) sexual intercourse, but who becomes sidelined once he discovers his passion for Arek as well as her conformism. These gradations, together with the mansion that formerly served as a hub for the city's gay men, point to the widespread nature of homosexuality that other films tend to localize.

Furthermore, in the span of 112 minutes, *Operation Hyacinth* marries the phenomenon of diversified homosexuality to such issues as governmental harassment, pervasive official unscrupulousness, personal and professional integrity, and fraught family relations. As in Piekorz's *Torpor/Drowsiness*, marriage receives short shrift. Edward Mrozowski is distant, dictatorial, and apparently incapable of genuine interaction with either wife (Agnieszka Suchora) or son.⁴⁶ Robert's colleague Wojtek Nogaś (Tomasz Schuchardt) treats his spouse as if she were a servant. And if Robert's relations with his fiancée, Halinka, seem promising early in the narrative, her compliance with compromised authority becomes an obstacle to Robert's search for the truth. In short, the homosexual bond with Arek unexpectedly unites the men through the shared values of love and honor. Compact and thematically resonant, the



Figures 22 and 23. Bartek's solitary early-morning rides represent his sole respite from work on the family farm and from his official employment in a bar. | With Dawid's arrival in the area, Bartek finds someone to love other than his horse. Both in *My End of the World* (*Mój koniec świata*).

⁴⁶ The emotionally incapacitated father also is overrunning current anglophone films. See Clarissa Cruz, "Fatherhood on Film: Dad Is Having a Rough Time Onscreen This Season," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/26/arts/film-dads-one-battle-after-another-ella-mccay.html?nl=The+Morning>.

film in its conciseness and inner dialogism validates the famous insistence of both Alfred Hitchcock and Roman Polanski on editing as the most important aspect of filmmaking.

In contrast to *Operation Hyacinth's* urban setting—consonant with noir film—Kamil Krawczycki's *Elephant* (Słoń, 2022) plays out in the remote foothills of the Tatra range (Podhal), following his earlier short about gay first love, *My End of the World* (*Mój koniec świata*, 2017/8).⁴⁷ Left in charge of the family farm and his alcoholic mother (Ewa Skibińska) after his father's defection and his sister's (Wiktoria Filus) departure for Norway with her boyfriend, young Bartek (Jan Hryniewicz) works at a bar and finds freedom in riding across the area's endless plains and hills on his beloved horse (figure 22). His life changes drastically with the arrival of Dawid (Paweł Tomaszewski), their neighbor's son, who returns 'home' after his alcoholic father suffers a fatal heart attack. The two young men draw close and ultimately become lovers (figure 23), unleashing the emotional blackmail of Bartek's mother and the aggressive prejudices of the conservative local yokels: the bar's owner fires Bartek; oafish neighbors paint "faggot" (*pedał*) in lurid red capitals on the wall of his house and rough him up. When Dawid declares his love and asks Bartek to leave with him for Iceland, Bartek initially refuses, but after Daria, his now pregnant sister, returns for good, he rethinks his decision, rescues the dog treated cruelly by his primitive neighbors, and heads for the airport, secure in the knowledge that Daria and his old friend Danuta (Ewa Kolasieńska), who earlier declared her affectionate devotion to him even if he were an elephant, will look after his mother and the farm.

Though even such sensitive critics as Ola Salwa found *Elephant* overly slow-paced,⁴⁸ that pace allows viewers to appreciate both the rhythms of the region and the multifaceted aspects of Bartek's daily humane generosity. Not only is he a full-time caretaker of an irresponsible parent, but he also shops for Danuta, takes Dawid's drunken father (Ireneusz Pastuszek) home when he becomes incapacitated, urges Daria to call their mother from Norway to improve her mood, and remembers to rescue the abused dog whom Dawid wished to help almost immediately upon his arrival. At the same time, he is an indefatigable physical worker, has warm relations with Danuta and male friends whom he meets in the bar where he works, and, in general, stands out as one of the most admirable men to appear on screen in a scenario that anathematizes ignorant prejudice. Like Ronduda's Rycharski, he constitutes an existential hero. Not a hint of effeminacy, hysteria, or other traits automatically ascribed to queer males impinge upon his image. Debatably, *Elephant's* importance for queer cinema resides in its geographical environment's confirmation that queerness is not confined to cultural centers subject to Western

⁴⁷ The most idiomatic translation from the Polish would be *My Back of Beyond*.

⁴⁸ Ola Salwa, "Review: *Elephant*," *Cineuropa*, 3 August 2022, <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/428504>.

Calling the film "charming and modest" if not devoid of clichés, Salwa rightly notes that Bartek's "buoyant personality" lends originality to the film. Her conviction that *Elephant* "should resonate well with audiences who have an appetite for simple and warm love stories" ignores the fact that the so-called love story transpires in what is an intransigently anti-LGBTQ community. For a negative and somewhat condescending review of the film, see Igor Kierkosz, "Słoń," *Kino 11* (2022): 82. For an interview with Krawczycki in the same issue, see 30-33.



Figure 24. Sylvester Borkowski as a garishly made-up drag queen in the poster for the serial/film *Queen (Królowa)*.

woman in Poland and now in Paris publicly performing as a **drag queen**—but that role is inhabited by Andrzej Seweryn (b. 1946), one of Poland’s most revered actors (and the entrepreneur Max in Wajda’s *Promised Land* fifty years earlier) (figure 24). Moreover, even when the conservative party PiS was in power, the film originally debuted as a 4-part TV serial in Poland, available for ‘family viewing.’ Unfortunately, the promising opening sequences, which convey Borkowski’s Parisian life as a colorful gender-bending performer and the sedate owner of a high-end male clothing store, devolve into sentimental scenes played out in Poland, where he travels in response to the request of his granddaughter, with



Figure 25. During the day Borkowski works as the sedate owner of a chic clothing store in Paris (*Queen (Królowa)*).

influence, which is what political conservatives in Poland, as elsewhere, contend, as though queerness were a transient fad or style. Just as significant, however, is the sheer human attractiveness of the major character—morally impeccable, responsible, compassionate, and endowed with humor—traits that ally him with *Operation Hyacinth*’s Arek and Robert. The film also raises the perennial question of what offspring owe to their parents, especially those who fail to perform their parental function. Unlike queers, parents come off badly in *Elephant*, as also in *Operation Hyacinth*, *The Suicide Room*, *Torpor/Drowsiness*, and other current releases tackling sundry phenomena, according to a recent informative review in *Kino*.⁴⁹

As increasingly individualized representations of queerness gathered momentum in the 2020s, one of the most striking moments was the appearance of Kośmicki’s *Queen* (2022), which overturned expectations on at least two fronts. Not only is its protagonist, Sylvester Borkowski, an affluent gay man in his seventies—formerly married to a

⁴⁹ Sebastian Jagielski, “Triumf dobra?” *Kino* 11 (2025): 59-62.

whom he has had no contact, having left his wife when he emigrated to pursue a life devoid of hypocrisy. Despite the weakness of the longer segments set in Poland, the film's assets include its refusal to suggest that a gay man's choice to seek self-fulfillment abroad automatically symptomatizes absence of human generosity and capacity for love (figure 25). And the lively, vivid scenes of his Parisian friendships and nightclub act constitute the most engaging aspects of the film, which reminds viewers that the pleasure of an openly lived gay life and success as a drag queen are not confined to rebellious youth.



Figures 26 and 27. Andrzej in the slow, laborious process of transforming into Aniela. | Their happy shared life and children ultimately bring Andrzej/Aniela and his/her wife, Iza, back together. Both in *Woman of...* (*Kobieta z...*).

Finally, approximately a decade after tackling homosexuality in the Polish Catholic Church, Szumowska in the Polish-Swedish coproduction *Woman of...* (*Kobieta z...*, 2023/4) turned to an equally controversial queer issue: that of **transsexuality**. An earlier documentary titled *Call Me Marianna* (*Mów mi Marianna*, 2015) had shared the harrowing experiences of a man who transitioned to womanhood, but so far *Woman of...* is the sole full-length feature to chart the same arduous trajectory. It dramatizes the unflagging struggles of a young man, Andrzej (Mateusz Więclawek), who, though in love with his wife and devoted to their two children, increasingly senses that his biological sex conflicts with his psychological self-identification as a woman (figure 26). His prolonged battle to align his body with his inner world must grapple with the temporary alienation of his wife, Iza (Joanna Kulig), his large family's incomprehension, and, as in several of the films discussed above, the hostility of a parochial environment, not to mention the local law. After forty-five years, Andrzej/Aniela (Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik) finally achieves her goal,

thanks partly to the wife who returns to her, and the eventual acceptance of her family members as well as some members of the community (figure 27). Spanning several decades but largely focused on the eighties, Szumowska's feature—its title evoking Wajda's internationally acclaimed *Man of...* films (1976; 1981)—emphasizes that the freedoms won by Solidarity and the country's final independence from the Soviet stranglehold did not encompass people's "inalienable right" to decide their own sexuality. At the same

time, it acknowledges improved, if imperfect, conditions for transsexuals and transgender individuals in contemporary Poland.

The film hugely benefits from an outstanding performance by Hajewska-Krzysztofik and the fine work of Więclawek, who plays both young Andrzej and his son, Jasiiek, in adulthood. Both the actress and actor, without an excess of makeup, have an androgynous appearance that lends credibility to the transition. Moreover, the research that Szumowska and her codirector and cinematographer, Michał Englert (her ex-husband), conducted before embarking on the film rendered the various stages of the protagonist's metamorphosis convincing. Ultimately, though the film echoes the by now familiar concept of the provinces as stiflingly ignorant and references the issue of coming out, it succeeds in casting a light on a phenomenon previously untouched by Polish feature films about queers.⁵⁰

Conclusion

As my overly condensed, highly selective glance at queerness on Polish screens over almost a century suggests, concepts of queerness and attitudes toward it have metamorphosed in the last few decades, owing largely to an increasingly sophisticated and informed cohort of young directors alert to sociopolitical developments. Neither heteronormative agendas nor ironclad notions of what precisely sexuality entails and who functions as its legislators and guardians inform a sizable body of films that prefer to investigate rather than inveigh against the different versions of a love that finally "dares to speak its name." Queer bonds appear onscreen in scenarios that resurrect the past (*Lovers of Marona*, *United States of Love*, *Operation Hyacinth*, *Woman of...*); spotlight appealing individuals in universally recognizable situations (*Homo Father*, *Torpor/Drowsiness*, *Elephant*, *Queen*); posit love as the supreme value (*Homo Father*, *Torpor/Drowsiness*, *In the Name of ...*, *Nina*, *Elephant*, *Woman of...*); feature suicide as an escape from experienced or anticipated aggressive animosity (*The Suicide Room*, *In the Name of ...*, *Operation Hyacinth*, *All Our Fears*); convey the inner conflicts attendant upon leaving a hetero partner for a queer one (*Floating Skyscrapers*, *Nina*, *Operation Hyacinth*); depict adamant paternal intolerance (*Torpor/Drowsiness*, *Operation Hyacinth*, *All Our Fears*); and rely on gifted actors and actresses⁵¹ who unhesitatingly assume key roles in narratives that, regrettably, still

⁵⁰ For the codirectors' interview about the film, see Małgorzata Szumowska, Michał Englert, "We hope this movie can change something," VENICE 2023 Competition, Cineuropa, September 11, 2023, <https://cineuropa.org/en/interview/449638/> [Interview with Savina Petkova]. For reviews of the film, see David Rooney, "Woman Of..." Review: Malgorzata Szumowska's Affecting Character Study Rescues Polish Trans People From the Invisible Margins," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/woman-of-review-malgorzata-szumowska-michal-englert-1235585400/>; Jonathan Romney, "'Woman Of...': Venice Review," *Screen Daily*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/woman-of-venice-review/5185692.article>. For additional commentary, see Goscilo and Albarano 2026, 50-53.

⁵¹ These include not only the young Mateusz Więclawek (b. 1993), Eliza Recembel (b. 1992), Tomasz Ziętek (b. 1989), and Mateusz Kościukiewicz (b. 1986), but also middle-aged Joanna Kulig (b. 1982) Julia Kijowska (b. 1981), Łukasz Simlat (b. 1977), and the considerably older Małgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik (b. 1965), Andrzej Chyra (b. 1964), and Andrzej Seweryn (b. 1946).

encounter prejudice and hostility from proponents of inflexible gender binarism, as manifested in the (only recently eliminated) LGBTQ-free zones. One can only hope that this set of films and similar fare on Tubi, Netflix, and Amazon's Prime Video will gradually bring popular opinion about Polish queers in line with the country's elimination of legal persecution of those who love "differently" (*Inaczej*)—the title of a monthly publication (1990–2002) that targeted the queer community but should have been read by anyone not indentured to a straitened (pun intended), sociopolitically-dictated concept of sexual possibilities.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press.
- Baer, Brian James. 2009. *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Basiuk, Thomas. 2018. "Coming Out in Poland." *European Journal of American Studies* 13 (3): 1–10.
- Benstock, Shari, and Susanne Ferriss, eds. 1994. *On Fashion*. Rutgers University Press.
- De Marco, Camillo. 2022. "Review: All Our Fears." MIX FESTIVAL 2022. *Cineuropa*, January 7. <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/427388>.
- Doty, Alexander. 2000. *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon*. Routledge.
- Dyer, Richard. 2002. *The Culture of Queers*. Routledge.
- Garber, Marjorie. 1992. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. Penguin Books.
- Goscilo, Helena. 2024. "Pretty and Macho: The Eroticized Physicality of Daniel Olbrychski." *Starlight and Stargazers: Slavic Screen Celebrities*, edited by Helena Goscilo. Academic Studies Press.
- . 2026. "A Neo-Noir Cop Out in Piotr Domalewski's *Operation Hyacinth* (*Hiacynt*, 2021)." *The Haunted Present: Slavic Neo-Noir Cinema and Television*, edited by Alexander Prokhorov, Elena Prokhorova, and Rimgaila Salys. Academic Studies Press.
- Goscilo, Helena and Beth Holmgren. 2021. *Polish Cinema Today: A Bold New Era in Film*. Lexington Books.
- Goscilo, Helena and Vincent Albarano. 2026. *Film's Feisty Femmes: Today's Polish Women Directors*. Academic Studies Press.
- Holmgren, Beth. 2023. "Early Polish-Language Musicals: The Tug of War between Genre Film and Cabaret." *Singing a Different Tune: The Slavic Film Musical*, edited by Helena Goscilo. Academic Studies Press.

- Holoubek, Jan. 2021. "Horror na niewysołych baginach." *Kino* 7: 31–33. [Interview with Ola Salwa.]
- Hutchens, Jack J. 2022. *Queer Transgressions in Twentieth-Century Polish Fiction: Gender, Nation, Politics*. Lexington Books.
- Jagielski, Sebastian. 2009. "Patrzeć przez peryskop: męskie pragnienie w filmach Andrzeja Barańskiego." *Ciało i seksualność w kinie polskim*, edited by Sebastian Jagielski and Agnieszka Morstin-Popławska. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- . 2013. *Maskarady męskości. Pragnienie homospołeczne w polskim kinie fabularnym*. Universitas.
- Jagielski, Sebastian and Agnieszka Morstin-Popławska, eds. 2009. *Ciało i seksualność w kinie polskim*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Kitraszewicz, Piotr. 2022. *Filmowcy przedwojennej Warszawy*. Biblioteka Publiczna m. st. Warszawy.
- Koper, Sławomir. 2023. *Mistrzowie polskiego kabaretu*. Fronda PL Sp. z.o.o..
- Kosińska, Karolina. 2009. "Manewry tożsamościowe. Kobieta jako mężczyzna i mężczyzna jako kobieta w przedwojennym polskim kinie komediowym." *Ciało i seksualność w kinie polskim*, edited by Sebastian Jagielski and Agnieszka Morstin-Popławska. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Kowalczyk, Janusz R. 2022. "Michał Waszyński," culture.pl, February 8. <https://culture.pl/en/artist/michal-waszynski>.
- Kurnik, Urszula. 2009. "Agnieszka z Człowieka z marmuru Andrzeja Wajdy—androgyn ze skaza." *Ciało i seksualność w kinie polskim*, edited by Sebastian Jagielski and Agnieszka Morstin-Popławska. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Mazierska, Ewa. 2009. "Od homoseksualisty do geja: konstrukcja 'innych seksualności' w polskim kinie okresu PRL-u." *Ciało i seksualność w kinie polskim*, edited by Sebastian Jagielski and Agnieszka Morstin-Popławska. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- . 2010. *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema: Black Peters and Men of Marble*. Berghahn Books.
- Piotrkowska, Anita. 2010. "Is Poland a Woman? Feminist and Homosexual Themes in Polish Film from 1989–2009." *Polish Cinema Now! Focus on Contemporary Polish Cinema*, edited by Mateusz Werner. Adam Mickiewicz Institute and John Libbey Pub. Ltd.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1986. "Compulsive Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980). *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–85*. W.W. Norton & Co.
- Skotarczak, Dorota. 2022. *Stanisław Bareja: Jego czasy i filmy*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Tomasik, Krzysztof. 2018. *Gejerel: Mniejszości seksualne w PRL-u*. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- . 2025. *Homolobby. Aktorzy II RP*. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.

- Watkins, Ali. 2025. "Kissing Has Existed for at Least 16 Million Years, Scientists Say." *The New York Times*, November 19. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/19/science/kissing-study-primates-science.html?nl=The+Evening>.
- Werner, Mateusz, ed. 2010. *Polish Cinema Now! Focus on Contemporary Polish Cinema*. Adam Mickiewicz Institute and John Libbey Pub. Ltd.
- Wilson, Elizabeth. 2014. *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*. I.B. Tauris.
- Wodzyński, Łukasz. 2025. "Framing Fearful Symmetry: Duality in Agnieszka Smoczyńska's Cinema." *The Polish Review* 70 (1): 51–69.