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Is There No Free Love in the Houses Made of Concrete? Intimate Narratives in the People's Republic of Poland

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In the houses made of concrete there is no free love. There are marital relations and acts of indecency. Casanova doesn't visit us here,"¹ sings Martyna Jakubowicz in a Polish hit from 1982. The melancholic song about the neighborly acquaintance between an anonymous woman and man unexpectedly stormed the music charts, rapidly gaining the status of a political manifesto while giving its singer a reputation as a moral provocateur. Yet Jakubowicz has repeatedly stressed that she does not deserve this

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1 The song is available to listen to (among others) here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYIEBgS3rk>, accessed February 25, 2024. English version of the lyrics: "I woke up later than usual / I got out of bed, there was music on the radio / I took off my shirt first then danced a bit / And for a while I felt like the Playboy girls / (Chorus) In the houses made of concrete / There is no free love / There are marital relations and acts of indecency / Casanova doesn't visit us here / The man from the opposite house who has a cat and a bicycle / He stood at the window as still as a rock / I thought it's for you this show / Let's move, I won't stand like this / In the afternoon I saw him in the grocery store / He only had eyes for me / With a shake of his head he showed me the window / So we will spend this evening together again." If not stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish are translated by the author of this article.

label. The story in the ballad was completely invented by her husband at the time, Andrzej Jakubowicz, who was inspired by the banal view from their flat window. "This was composed by my former spouse while sitting in a block of flats. He was probably writing at his desk, looking out of the window at the horrible Stegny district, with its gray concrete all the way to the horizon. You couldn't see anything else, and he probably watched himself as people existed, turning off lights, turning on lights, going to work, coming from work. It's not a real story."² Martyna Jakubowicz also rejects any political interpretations of the song:

I know from my fans that for many people this was rather a song that they made love to. That's why many girls who were born in the 1980s are named Martyna. As a matter of fact, though, for some it is a song about the lack of freedom, and for others it is precisely about freedom [...]. I was not an opposition fighter, because I'm not one for going out with flags to the barricades. I didn't participate in the life of the opposition and didn't conduct political struggle through songs [...]. Since I didn't get in the way of the authorities, the authorities didn't bother me either. For me, the music I cared about would always be music of the heart, not a political manifesto [...]. It was just a nice song. It was successful, so I guess it's important to people.³

Indeed, it is a nice song. In my opinion, however, its impact is not only a result of its aesthetic qualities. The song has stirred the collective imagination because, while it is not a true story, it does feel like one. It depicts a typical late-socialist Polish landscape, a concrete housing estate, which metonymically evokes the omnipresent mood of grayness; as well as the typical property status of its average inhabitant ("a cat and a bicycle"); finally, it captures the typical horizon of the desires of its average inhabitant defined by the figures of the absent Casanova and the "Playboy girl," which becomes a disguise allowing her to break away for a moment from the rules of the sleepy everyday life of the socialist housing block. Moreover, the song describes one of the basic principles of this reality, in which the space of the home becomes a space of merely concessional freedom, and the traditional boundaries between private and public are

2 "Historia pewnej płyty *Mam na imię Martyna, to na pani cześć* (radio program)" [The story of a certain album "My name is Martyna, it's in your honor (radio program)", accessed January 24, 2024, <https://www.polskieradio24.pl/6/13/Artykul/319851,Mam-na-imie-Martyna-to-na-pani-czesc>; transcript: <http://www.niezapomniana.pl/img.php?id=652>.

3 Martyna Jakubowicz and Mariusz Urbanek, "Kobieta z betonu" [Woman of concrete], *Wysokie Obcasy* 17 (2008), accessed January 24, 2024, <https://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,5151645.html>.

disrupted as well. That porosity is exposed, on the one hand, in the interplay of the gazes of the song's characters in the windows, which reveals both a panoptic crampedness and a lack of intimacy, but also paradoxically establishes such an intimacy. On the other hand, the permeability of the social orders is indicated by the language of the state and conventionality intruding into this intimate lyric, as expressed in the legislative phrase of "marital relations and acts of indecency." In short, Jakubowicz tells a love story of that time. All the more evocative if we consider the song's basic historical background, which I have not yet mentioned explicitly: the time of Martial Law (1981–1983).

I start by mentioning the rather trivial circumstances of the song's origins and popularity, because in the entanglement of everyday life, feelings and power, Jakubowicz's song encapsulates a record of the socialist experiences of the People's Republic of Poland, which I would like to examine more closely. Furthermore, the song aptly illustrates the discourse in which these experiences are articulated. In order to define it, it might be helpful to cite Lauren Berlant's explorations of the intimate public sphere as a phenomenon in which narratives of all kinds are read as autobiographies of collective experience.⁴ The intimate public is not defined by literal autobiographicality, although first-person narratives appear relatively frequently in it. According to Berlant, what determines its framing is the almost automatic self-identification of its subjects in the plots, worldviews and emotional knowledge that these narratives – regardless of their fictionality or factuality – offer, and the assumption that they derive from everyday and, so to speak, general human experience.⁵ Therefore, the intimate public sphere suggests scenarios of familiar and frequently experienced histories, which are considered both an expression of common experience and the outcome of this commonness produced by it. The issue here is the space of mediation, which is generated – as in the case of Jakubowicz's song – at the intersection of fictionality and lifeworld, and when the denial of direct autobiographicality is accompanied by anonymous self-recognition. Effectively, at its center remain fantasies of the common, the everyday and the ordinary, usually of a positive hue.

The public sphere is made intimate when the emotional attachments of its subjects come to the fore and the scenarios of events and behavioral modes circulating in it turn out to be not real, but possible. Such an understanding enables lateral identification, which takes place, as it were, alongside the identity production of more petrified social and national structures. Berlant

4 Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), vii.

5 *Ibid.*, 10.

describes this position as juxtapolitical.⁶ It is in close proximity to the political register, but only sometimes intersects directly with it. Again, the case of the song reflects the nature of it quite well; above all Jakubowicz's unwillingness to get involved, her consensus attitude towards reality, and her commitment to "music of the heart," which is not as much about leading to the barricades as bringing comfort to listeners as indeterminate as she is. After all, in the matter of the intimate public, politics is a threat that is linked to the spectrum of various exclusions or coercion, thus always located "elsewhere." The intimate public itself, on the other hand, functions as a scene of escape, in which things commonly understood as non-political – that is, feelings and attitudes that in these "elsewheres" would be considered ridiculous, petty or inadequate – are brought to the center stage. Thus it provides a kind of asylum for those who are unwilling or unable to participate in "big" politics. It is a space, as Berlant continues, that produces relief from daily oppressions, postpones civic duties, and eases social frictions and antagonisms.

This situation, of course, does not mean that the intimate public is apolitical. On the contrary, it can be considered declaratively apolitical at best. On the one hand, after all, the narratives characteristic of it are most often classified among moral genres that remain anchored in conventional and normative notions of the good life that reproduce structures of power. On the other hand, it also happens that even in the most mediocre forms there are moments of critical dissent. More broadly, they become, as it were, secondarily politicized in relation to the canons through which even that mediocrity defines itself. To be more precise: according to Berlant, what is at stake is not to negate these – well-recognized, even banal – attachments and arrangements, but to redirect attention to the more vernacular circulations of intimate content and the modes through which they organize the public sphere. Central to this reflection remains the problem of the ambivalence of intimate narratives, which as much preserve the structures of social worlds as they produce the energy for their radical critique. Finally, this reflection is also stimulated by the question of what actually determines that the scales of publicity identification favor one side or the other, and by the question of why the oscillatory status of such stories for their female users often turns out to be perfectly sufficient.

By invoking Berlant's ideas, I want to consider whether an intimate public can exist under different political conditions than those initially examined by the American scholar. The example of Jakubowicz's song suggests a positive answer and indicates that its mechanisms would converge at least at certain points. The allusion to a shameless excess that organizes the singing genre scene indicates the limits of the moral norm. The song itself, however, acts as

6 Ibid., X.

an equation, oscillating in reception between, to repeat Jakubowicz, “a song about the lack of freedom” or a song “just about freedom.” It also opens up to situations that do not easily lend themselves to “politics per se,” but rather build a sense of emotional belonging.⁷ And this is all that may or may not result in political agency. However, while for Berlant the inevitable enabler of this possible transformation is liberal democracy, people’s democracy seems at first glance to create different conditions of articulation and a different dynamic for the functioning of intimate stories in the public sphere. Such possible differences are the first issue that will interest me here.

The second point is the realm of experiences that Jakubowicz’s song reveals, which one might call *minorum gentium* experiences. This refers to a corpus of stories and images that remain within the close proximity of “ordinary people” and happen somewhere on the edge of “big” history and politics, but, as I will argue further, resonate closely, though sometimes in a non-obvious way, with it. For all these reasons, then, the song becomes a starting point to ask somewhat more general questions: how do these types of projections of intimacy work in communist conditions? What characterizes them? And finally, what can the launch of the perspective of intimate stories bring to the understanding and study of the culture of the People’s Republic of Poland?

Intimacy under Suspicion

In dictionary definitions, intimacy is derived from the Latin *intimus*, which is the superlative degree of *interior* (inner) and means: “something of a personal or private nature,” “the state of being intimate,”⁸ that is “marked by a warm friendship developing through long association,” “suggesting informal warmth or privacy,” “engaged in, involving, or marked by sex or sexual relations.”⁹ Its colloquial understandings, meanwhile, cover a wide range of phenomena from erotic experiences through various formulations of the practices of love, friendship or familiarity, to the secret and idiomatic qualities of individual emotional life. According to the approach I am interested in here, oriented towards the social interactional and relational aspects of intimacy, it is defined across the entire spectrum of such glossary possibilities. It could therefore be seen precisely as synonymous with sexuality – as is the case in

7 Ibid., 38.

8 See, e.g., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intimacy>, accessed January 1, 2024.

9 See, e.g., <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intimate>, accessed January 1, 2024.

The Transformation of Intimacy by Anthony Giddens, who sees the title category as an instrument of democratization of modern societies.¹⁰ It could also be synonymous to feelings – such an approach resounds in the Polish translation of Eva Illouz's book *Cold Intimacies*, dedicated to the mechanisms of commodification and rationalization of them within the framework of twentieth-century therapeutic culture.¹¹ Finally, it could be synonymous to kinship and familiarity – such an interpretation is proposed by Michael Herzfeld in the *Cultural Intimacy*, which describes the importance of social cordiality as unacknowledged in the centers of power, but powerful ways in which subjects recognize themselves as a national community.¹²

These references give a very brief indication of some of the undoubtedly most influential approaches to the study of intimacy. At this point, however, I would like to highlight a certain pattern. Giddens writes at the outset of his work, “modern societies have a covert emotional history, yet to be fully drawn into the open.”¹³ Illouz begins by noting the state of the research with the following words: “most grand sociological accounts of modernity contained, in a minor key, another story: namely descriptions or accounts of the advent of modernity in terms of emotions.”¹⁴ Pointing to the marginalized, but still present appearance of emotions in classical sociological thought, she defines her goals as follows: “to recover that not-so-hidden dimension of modernity.”¹⁵ Herzfeld, on the other hand, identifies his aims as “revealing the cultural secrets of their nation-states”¹⁶ and peeking behind “facades of national culture.”¹⁷ Thus, intimacy functions here each time as something essentially hidden – to varying extents – and generally as something that is placed on the private “side” of reality.

10 Anthony Giddens, *Intimacy, Sexuality, Love and Emotions in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

11 Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies. The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Malden: Polity Press, 2007). Polish edition: Eva Illouz, *Uczucia w dobie kapitalizmu*, trans. Zygmunt Simbierowicz (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2010). The original title in Polish was translated exactly as “Feelings in the Age of Capitalism.”

12 Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy. Social Poetics and the Real Life of States, Societies, and Institutions* (London: Routledge, 2016).

13 Giddens, *Intimacy*, 2.

14 Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, 10 (epub edition).

15 *Ibid.*, 12.

16 Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy*, 2.

17 *Ibid.*, 61.

Yet this dichotomous spatial matrix can be modified when reaching for the verbal variant of intimacy, namely the Latin *intimare*, which means both to “communicate through allusions” and “to notify.” This is exactly the track Berlant follows in her account, in which the association of intimacy with the act of uttering, recording and public announcement makes intimacy a medium that serves as a bridge between the private and public orders, anchoring the experiences of the individual in the trajectories of collective life.¹⁸ In such a view, intimacy obtains the character of a narrative, and with it its specific poetics as well. According to Berlant, typical intimate narratives would include stories of love, family and fulfillment, but also their reverse: stories of betrayal or boredom. Conversely, typical intimate poetics would include melodramas, autobiographies and entertainment genres, but also more discrete and more ephemeral forms based on eloquence and requiring the ability to read complex signs and gestures. The increased presence of this type of narrative in the public sphere makes it possible, in effect, to look at the latter as a reality in which it is the emotions, feelings and sentiments circulating in texts and linked to intimacy that normalize certain models of subjectivity and formulate the conditions for individuals to recognize themselves as a society, often ahead of more “rational” policies.

To sum up, in all the approaches I mention, making the public sphere intimate is (in the end) valued positively: as a measure of democratization and emancipation. However, such an interpretation is complemented by a darker variant of the history of modern intimacy, which is activated particularly in the study of societies caught up in multidimensional histories of violence (class, ethnic, colonial). A brilliant discussion of this problematic is offered by Ann Laura Stoler, who – to stay with the nuances of vocabulary – focuses the reflection this time on a pseudo-etymological figure, namely, she proposes to associate intimacy with intimidation (from Latin *intimidare*), that is, oppression.¹⁹ Stoler traces the ways by which imperial formations consolidated their presence through “intimate social ecologies”²⁰ (spaces of the home, alcoves, etc.), “sentimental affiliations”²¹ (marital, familial and affectional relationships) and by “shaping appropriate and reasoned affect”²² (value systems

18 Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 282-283.

19 Ann Laura Stoler, *Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen*, in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

20 *Ibid.*, XI.

21 *Ibid.*, XIII.

22 *Ibid.*, 2.

transmitted through educational and upbringing processes affecting family customs, misalliances, etc.). She argues that intimate matters played a key role in modern orders of power, since it was in them that the grammar of race and class resonated most forcefully.

In the triviality of this conclusion, however, lies the magnitude of the overlooking of aspects of imperial history that are of interest to Stoler. Intimate images and stories often refute widespread modern nomenclature; they are usually not articulated directly, and their comprehension often proceeds at the level of embodied knowledge, but despite (or perhaps because of) this, they give the impression of being "strangely familiar"²³; and it is precisely because of this effect of familiarity that they remain more difficult to grasp. On the one hand, it is about the occupation that "we cannot see and what we know."²⁴ On the other hand, the point is about quite visible elements of the archives, which until now have been treated as irrelevant, overly obvious or unspecific. In this regard, Stoler writes about the troublesome position of intimate data (family stories, love affairs, but also metrics, which determines the troublesome position of their model researcher: the historian), at the same time noting that the chances of overcoming this impasse are created only by new methodological sensibilities, located at the intersection of postcolonial, feminist, memory and affective studies.²⁵

From this brief overview of research, I would like to draw two basic conclusions that may prove useful in rethinking the relationship between intimacy and power in the People's Republic of Poland. Firstly, the understanding of intimacy is shifting from seeing it as something hidden, and often off-screen, to treating it as narratives circulating in the public sphere. Secondly, contrary to the usual topographies of modern social worlds, intimacy is not placed on their periphery, but remains at their very core, a position that is, however, often blinded. Following these indications, therefore, in the next sections I will try to expand on the characteristics of the narratives I am interested in here, and point to one such overlooked, but still central juncture of the intersection of Polish communist power and intimacy.

Misfortunes, Mere Misfortunes

An interesting resource for considering the peculiarities of the People's Republic of Poland's intimate narratives is provided by a volume of reportage

23 *Ibid.*, 14.

24 *Ibid.*, XIII.

25 *Ibid.*, 79.

published in 1981 entitled *Kto dzisiaj kocha...* [Who loves today...].²⁶ The character of this book is best captured by an anonymous reviewer, who wrote on a website that: “the book describes the problems of women in the 1970s. Some I know from my own experience; others seem a bit exaggerated. It is a collection of average reportages that might have appeared in women’s magazines in those years.”²⁷ However, the title of the anthology remains misleading to some extent: it does contain accounts of the pursuit of a husband and of marriage, of single motherhood and of caring for sick children, but the love itself, the romance, emotional and sexual life, are relegated to the background, remaining virtually unspoken in these narratives. Instead, we have a number of looping motifs that are worth a brief look.

First: marriage relations – the most important, but unromantic case. As the worker from the reportage “Ostatnie tango w hotelu ‘Rytex’” [Last tango at the Rytex hotel] says, “the dream of the heart is for the youngest ones. We look at men practically – he doesn’t drink, has an apartment and what others have – this is enough to go to the altar with him.”²⁸ Elżbieta, the protagonist of the reportage “Zabezpieczyć męża” [Securing a husband] expresses similar views. The stakes of the titular challenge are high: “if her plan succeeds, if he falls into the trap of the plan, the rest of life will be easy. [...] There will be a house. A clean one. With a wonderful bathroom. There will be curtain rods fastened by his hands, and from these curtain rods the curtains will flow to the ground.”²⁹ Elżbieta’s peer, a single mother from the reportage “Zmarnowałaś życie, idiotko!” [You wasted your life, idiot!] explains the priority of getting married simply: privileging young married couples in the queue for flats. Meanwhile, after marriage, everything usually seems to be on the uphill side: “marriage consists of cleaning, fatigue, arguing and haste.”³⁰

Second: living in a block of flats. “When the lights come on in the cinema, you have to go back to your room. You have to go to work or sleep, or you have to stand at the window and look at the beautiful housing development,”³¹ says

26 Helena Madany, ed., *Kto dzisiaj kocha...* [Who loves today] (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1981).

27 An anonymous entry accessed on <https://www.biblionetka.pl/art.aspx?id=24436>, January 21, 2024.

28 Michał Mońko, “Ostatnie tango w hotelu ‘Rytex’” [Last tango at the Rytex hotel], in *Kto dzisiaj kocha...*, 21.

29 Ewa Szemplińska, “Zabezpieczyć męża” [Securing a husband], in *Kto dzisiaj kocha...*, 143.

30 Anna Grigo, “Tadeusz i Małgorzata” [Tadeusz and Małgorzata] in *Kto dzisiaj kocha...*, 119.

31 Mońko, “Ostatnie tango w hotelu ‘Rytex’,” 19.

another resident of the Rytex hotel dreamily. A number of the female protagonists of the reportages are put up by their families or live in dormitories, care centers, factory barracks or old family cottages. Definitely: in flats far too small for them. The concrete houses in the reportages are luxury goods, "branches of heaven," as Małgorzata Szejnert writes.³²

Third: freedom and free love. To be more precise: in the reportages there is no mention of freedom, nor even less of free love; instead, there are piles of dirty dishes, hollow couches and nosy neighbors. One of the protagonists confesses: "she hasn't had unhappy loves, but her life is like this: she throws pots in the sink, it's already nine o'clock, her husband eats sausage out of the fridge, and she doesn't feel free."³³ Another girl has no illusions: "first there was the escape to Warsaw, a head full of dreams and a mouth full of clichés about a free life [...] there was the escape to college, which was supposed to bring not only knowledge and status, but also liberation [...]. Hope begins with college, hope for everything, which is way too much [...] if a girl says she wants to be free, she is either lying, meaning she has given up, or she's showing off, or she is stupid."³⁴ Making a living in the city, women's experience shows, financially is almost impossible alone. In order to save social advancement, the girl's marital status must be sacrificed.

Fourth: aspirations. The horizon of the women characters' desires is quite predictable: an apartment, high-gloss furniture, carpets, vacations at the seaside, a small car and an allotment garden. The dream of singing lessons from the reportage "Portret Ewy M." [Portrait of Eve M.] turns out to be an unprecedented whimsy here. The most eloquent visions of the good life, however, are collected in Barbara Łopieńska's reportage "Syn" [The son], in which she asks future mothers at a maternity hospital how they imagine their child's life. The beginning looks good: kindergarten, tennis lessons, good dinners. Next, the visions of the mothers-to-be slide further and further into gloomy realities: "he'll finish school – he'll start to climb the ladder. And then? – And then? Then nothing special will happen to him."³⁵ Regardless of whether mothers see their child as a future steelworker, writer or engineer, when asked how they see his daily life, a similar answer is given. Łopieńska encapsulates this

32 Małgorzata Szejnert, "Czwarte piętro, filia nieba" [The fourth floor, branch of heaven], in *Kto dzisiaj kocha...*, 50–61.

33 Barbara Łopieńska, "Syn" [The son], in *Kto dzisiaj kocha...*, 25.

34 Szemplińska, "Zabezpieczyć męża," 136–143.

35 Łopieńska, "Syn," 27.

in a short sentence: “going to work, coming home, going to the cinema with his wife, coming home.”³⁶

Fifth: politics and career. The protagonists in the reportages stay away from the former – as in the case of “*Życie rodzinne*” [Family life]: “there is nothing to talk about politics. Because a person can’t be political.”³⁷ Symptomatically, the only representatives of authority in the 22 texts collected in the volume are the social aid officer and the district policeman. Career – yes, sometimes characters manage to move up a level or two in the social hierarchy, but they never reach so high as to engage in big (or at least district) politics. And that is actually a good situation – the mothers-to-be in the delivery room agree on this: “you shouldn’t get caught up in state affairs, because no private brain can unravel that. I get the shivers when I think that my son might be the chief of the municipality.”³⁸

And the final motif: troubles. Natalia Iwaszkiewicz writes about her protagonists: “troubles – as many as there are hairs on the head: a sickly child, a shabby apartment.”³⁹ Another author echoes her: “things that are filmically trivial, but how cruel in life.”⁴⁰ Divorce, miscarriage, mental illness, accident, widowhood, disability, loneliness, poverty – one might say: the infinity of sadness constantly fueled by patriarchal violence.

From today’s perspective, what appears to be an expression of boundless hopelessness, however, in the eyes of the protagonists of the reportages appears quite bearable. In this regard, the words of yet another reportage protagonist whose children have been in trouble with the law are very telling: “why say right away that they did not succeed! Is it something so unusual? Did it only happen in my family? [...] There may have been some misfortunes, but so what? After all, she is not the only one. What happens to people, happens to us.”⁴¹ Equally significant is the reader’s assessment cited at the beginning of this section, noting that the texts are “a bit exaggerated,” but one could say that not so much so as to suspend one’s recognition or to treat the events presented in them as anomalies.

³⁶ Ibid., 32.

³⁷ Krystyna Jagiełło, “*Życie rodzinne*” [Family live], in *Kto dzisiaj kocha...*, 206.

³⁸ Łopieńska, “Syn,” 29.

³⁹ Natalia Iwaszkiewicz, “Jak ptaki z gniazda...” [Like birds from the nest...], in *Kto dzisiaj kocha...*, 281.

⁴⁰ Grigo, “Tadeusz i Małgorzata,” 259.

⁴¹ Joanna Siedlecka, “Co ludziom, to i nam” [What happens to people, happens to us], in *Kto dzisiaj kocha...*, 188.

The themes of the reportages, their declarative belonging to so-called “women’s culture,” and the refusal of politicization they manifest encourage us to consider them as examples of the texts of the intimate public. Then, however, it turns out that we are facing a pivotal reversal. If for Berlant consolation and recognition are inherently brought by happy stories that more or less directly mediate political (albeit cruel) optimism, then in the case of *Who Loves Today...* such possible consolation and recognition seems to be brought by mediocre or even tragic plots, which would rather be sponsored by political pessimism. Just as if the rule “others are doing badly too, if not worse” is a sufficient (and even the only) source of identification and of empathy as such; since after all, nothing connects like sadness. At the same time, the reportages depict a specific flattening of intimate worlds deprived neither only of sexuality or tenderness, but also of the emotions accompanying them. In the reality of reportage in the People’s Republic of Poland there is no place for both (romantic) love and despair over the lack of it; a symbolic place, but also a literal place. The most we can note is an anemic struggle with this state of affairs or a melancholy resignation.

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that the reportages shatter the positive image of the 1970s era in Poland. However, their status can be considered ambivalent. On the one hand, some of the authors had censorship problems with the reprinting of texts from *Who Loves Today...* in individual books.⁴² On the other hand, in the anthology, the same texts become an element of support for social pedagogy, which is directly expressed in the introduction to the book. The reportages serve in it as anti-examples mainly due to the assumption of the otherness of the “female gaze” which, as it were, would automatically serve to blunt the sharpness of criticism.⁴³ That volume’s extremely condescending ideological framework thus means that it goes from texts originally written rather “against” to texts written rather “on behalf of” communist power through a strong discursive frame.

42 A striking example of this is the case of Hanna Krall and her book *Katar sienny* [Hay fever], in which the reportage from *Kto dziś kocha ...* and several other press texts maintained in a similar style and theme) was to be reprinted, but its entire print run was destroyed just in 1981.

43 See Mikołaj Kozakiewicz, *Wstęp* [Introduction], in *Kto dzisiaj kocha...* Kozakiewicz was a well-known People’s Republic of Poland sociologist of the family. About the circumstances of the volume’s creation, he writes as follows: “this book becomes [...] indirectly an appeal for broad efforts to improve human relations in general, to combat social vices and addictions, mistakes in the functioning of institutions [...] Out of the awareness of how important this area is, these reportages were born in the feminine insightful and sensitive, but in the masculine bold and combative.” *Ibid.*, 12.

Tales of Impossible Loves

To the collection of stories discussed here, I would like to add a few parallel, but this time visual narratives, which, when juxtaposed with reportages, perhaps make even more evident the fluidity of the boundary between what is acceptable and harmless, and what is not. The first of these is presented by Wojciech Wiszniewski in the film *Historia pewnej miłości* [Random love story] (1974/1981): the boy – a bachelor and a simple-minded worker – has just learned that the works council will fast-track his apartment allocation, but only on condition that he moves in with his wife; the girl – beautiful and ambitious, works in an office and lives in a shabby cramped apartment with her family. The boy falls in love at first sight, while the girl rather makes calculations. The negotiations on love take place in a turpist space crowded with neighbors and sub-tenants. Then things move quickly: a wedding, a move, betrayal and the girl's escape. The second tale is Agnieszka Holland's *Kobieta samotna* [A lonely woman] (1981/1987), with comparable crampedness, yet with the load of misery multiplied significantly. The woman – a single mother, lives in an unheated shed somewhere near the railway tracks, struggling unsuccessfully to find an apartment; the man – younger than her, on a disability pension, sublets a room from a nosy married couple. A seed of affection is born between the protagonists, but soon withered by the lack of private space. Further on, we observe a cascading sequence of events: a dream of escape, a theft, a murder. Tale number three is Barbara Sass's *Krzyk* [The scream] (1982). The girl – a petty thief, just released from prison, living with her mother and her vodka friends in a repulsive room; the boy – who arrived in the city from the countryside, has settled in an inconspicuous barrack in the suburbs in anticipation of being assigned an apartment. For a while, the youngsters live happily among furniture and appliances cobbled together from nothing. The rest of the story, however, consists of the news of the apartment allocation, the lack of funds to finalize it, a breakup, an attempted theft, and a murder. A fourth tale, older but essentially similar, is told by Aleksander Ford in *Ósmy dzień tygodnia* [Eighth day of the week] (1958/1983), with the plot driven by a couple in love's unsuccessful search for a place to be alone for a while. This again leads to an inevitably unhappy ending.

The above compilation may seem inappropriate as much because of the blatant abbreviation of the plots as because of the disrupted chronology.⁴⁴ However, I collect these narratives here because they all still tell the same

44 *A Lonely Woman* was produced in 1981, but only released in 1987. Shot in 1982, *The Scream* hit the screens a year later. Wiszniewski's film, on the other hand, was made in 1974, but did not have its premiere until 1981. The case was similar with Ford's film, shot in 1958, but not made public until 1983. All the films were halted by communist censorship.

plot that interests me. They all deconstruct in a robust sense the relationship between love, fulfillment, and conventional “houses made of concrete.” All the films feature protagonists who are unwilling or unable to exist in the political reality. This is exemplified by the famous scene in *A Lonely Woman*, when the main character indifferently walks past a Solidarity unionist demonstration against the communist authorities, as well as by the rejection of the main character of *The Scream* from both social welfare and Solidarity activists she meets at work. Finally, all of these narratives were filmed or saw the light of day in the first half of the 1980s, as if it was at this point when a space to make visible a certain story of the post-war era appeared.

However, the links between love, “houses made of concrete,” and power go back to the very beginnings of communist Poland. As Tomasz Żukowski notes: “the issue of engaging erotic desires turned out to be of key significance for the legitimization of change and of the new authorities. Romance was at the center of the tale about building a new society, and not as a remnant of prewar methods of storytelling, nor as a trick to smuggle in boring ideological content. It was rather driven by the needs that underpinned the very foundations of the revolution and, thanks to this, effectively organized the collective imagination.”⁴⁵ Proof of this can be found in film productions from the Socialist Realist period, including Leonard Buczkowski’s famous *Przygoda na Mariensztacie* [Adventure in Mariensztat] (1953), a film that tells the love story of the bricklayer Janek and Hanka, a soloist in a folk ensemble, who is also employed at a construction site. According to Żukowski, the story not only presents the new realities of labor, the worker-peasant alliance or the communists’ demands for women’s emancipation, but also a significant shift in the depiction of the revolution itself. Janek and Hanka are no longer angry workers watching out for the enemy, but a laughing couple who, after the day’s work, dress up in fashionable clothes and go dancing; they are driven not by the desire to fight, but by private aspirations. The protagonists are building a new order, but also their relationship and their home – in a completely literal, material as well as emotional sense. Żukowski writes, “Eros, the sexual energy of romance, feeds into the revolution and propels it forward. The union of lovers represents the signifier of the project and its embodiment; the dream, its coming true, as well as the creation and consolidation of change.”⁴⁶

However, this propagandistic energy of the early postwar era and the new imagination it generated burned out very quickly, around 1956.

45 Tomasz Żukowski, *Eroticism and Power*, in *Reassessing Communism. Concepts, Culture, and Society in Poland, 1944–1989*, ed. Katarzyna Chmielewska, Agnieszka Mrozik and Grzegorz Wołowicz (Budapest: CEU Press, Budapest 2021), 115–116.

46 *Ibid.*, 118.

The later cinema blockbusters of the 1970s, such as Andrzej Kostenko and Witold Leszczyński's *Rewizja osobista* [Personal review] (1972) and Tadeusz Chmielewski's *Nie lubię poniedziałku* [I don't like Monday] (1971), would be a reflection of what evolved from the ruins of the revolution project: love relationships as a transaction in which feelings and intimate relations become currency exchanged for privileges and material goods (including housing), while the equality of women, projected at the dawn of the postwar era, is increasingly lost in patriarchal clichés.⁴⁷

In such a perspective, the stories, in which the establishment of deep intimate relationships and their fulfillment is unfeasible due to the lack of space suitable, can be read, however pompous this term may be, as a sign of the ultimate failure of the revolution as well as a kind of point of arrival of the history of the abandonment of the post-war modernization project. Or at least as a certain part of it oriented programmatically towards the production of desires and notions of the good life, the realization of which the authorities did not actually keep up with from the very beginning. As those narratives no longer expressing the official cultural policy of the authorities, but the sentiments of oppositionist communities and "ordinary" citizens, they would thus reveal with particular (melo)dramatic force what had been located in that gap, growing in direct proportion over the decades: structural and infrastructural violence, which, loosely by popular association, could also be called a banal violence – diluted and naturalized in the broader field of everyday experiences of crampedness, shortages and deprivations; the impossibility of moving patriarchal patterns; violence involuntarily normalized in collision with the more pronounced and brutal variants of communist repressions. Thereby, the pictures can arguably be seen as an illustration of "unfulfilled promises of prosperity"⁴⁸ and an emanation of the emotional condition that undoubtedly influenced the social demands formulated by the Solidarity movement, and in a broader, contemporary perspective, as a cultural supplement to the historical and social diagnoses of the political changes of the 1980s.

47 Moreover, this scheme reflects a more general diagnosis of the social transformations of the Real Socialist era (the 60s and the 70s). On the one hand, they were related to the conservative backlash that took place after 1956 and defined Polish moralities for the following decades; on the other hand – to the soc-consumerism of the early Gierek era (the 70s.), which essentially activated the latent middle-class imagination. See Dobrochna Kałwa, "Post-Stalinist Backlash in Poland," *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire* 41 (2015): 165–174; Justyna Jaworska, *Piękne widoki, panowie, stąd macie. O kinie polskiego socjonizmizmu* [Beautiful views, gentlemen, from here. On the cinema of Polish social consumerism] (Kraków: Universitas, 2019).

48 Małgorzata Mazurek, *Spółeczeństwo kolejki. O doświadczeniach niedoboru 1945–1989* [The queue society. On the experiences of scarcity 1945–1989] (Warszawa: Trio, 2010), 181.

Towards a Civic Imagination

The narratives, which were intended to help me reconstruct the intimate public sphere, in the end probably said more about the inevitable politicization of intimacy in the People's Republic of Poland. Their fates were variable. *Houses Made of Concrete* quickly sank in the music charts. *Who Loves Today...* ranks in the category of books sold off for pennies in discount stores. The female authors of the reportages, if they function in the reading discourses, it is rather due to later books published in opposition outlets.⁴⁹ Wiszniewski's and Ford's films hold cult status, but mainly due to their status of being the movies withheld by censorship for longest. Sass and Holland's films, in contrast, are considered outstanding, but at the same time they are regarded as feminine, boundary-breaking, polemical variations on the subject of the cinema of moral anxiety, rather than as emblematic examples of it.

Generalizing, all these works can be considered to be located somewhere next to such emblematic, better-remembered or perhaps default (male) images of the first half of the 1980s. At the same time, they supply the field of stories that are well known or "strangely familiar," recognizable and well experienced. On the one hand, therefore, they may seem all too obvious, but on the other, all too unsuited to the cultural scenarios of time of Martial Law.

What is at stake here is the heroic-insurgent dominant image of martial law as mass mobilization; as the last Romantic uprising; as an event that in the archive of lawful Polish culture is encoded in the ranks of non-alternative values such as "freedom," "struggle," "independence" or "brotherhood."⁵⁰ Yet it is precisely on this maladjustment that the troublesomeness of the evoked narratives – slipping through the rules of this archive, and at the same time articulating the experience of the silent majority,⁵¹ which could not or would not correct its shape – would be founded.

49 See, among others, Barbara Łopieńska and Ewa Szymańska, *Stare numery* [Old numbers] (Londyn: Aneks, 1986); Teresa Torańska, *Oni* [They] (Londyn: Aneks, 1985); Ewa Berberyusz, "Lechu" [Lech], *Głos*, 1982; Ewa Berberyusz, *Pierwsze wejście* [First entrance] (Warszawa: Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, 1984); Joanna Siedlecka, *Parszywa sytuacja, jaworowe dzieci* [Lousy situation, Sycamore children] (Poznań SAWW, 1991).

50 Marcin Zaremba, "Im się zdaje, że zapomnimy. O nie! Rodowody rewolucji" [They think we will forget. Oh no! Genealogy of the Revolution], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2016): 183. Przemysław Czaplinski, "Bunt w ramach pamięci. 'Solidarność,' rewolucja, powstanie," *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2016): 204–225; Maria Kobielska, *Polska kultura pamięci w XXI wieku: dominanty. Zbrodnia katyńska, powstanie warszawskie i stan wojenny* [Polish culture of memory in the twenty-first century: dominants. The Katyn massacre, the Warsaw Uprising and Martial Law] (Warszawa, Wydawnictwo IBL, 2016), 297–389.

51 On the silent majority, see more Stefan Chwin, "Polska pamięć – dzisiaj. Co pozostaje? Trwały ślad i mechanizmy niepamiętania" [Polish memory – today. What remains?

Hence, I recall these narratives not because they remain completely absent from the collective consciousness, but rather because they reflect the framework of the civic imagination, which in Polish culture is allowed to speak only under certain conditions – most often in the variant of comedy. Meanwhile, making a rightful place for this type of imagination and its basic genres in the social imaginaries and taking into account narratives from the periphery of the canon, or simply outside of it, is one of the first steps to unlearn imperialism. As Ariella Azoulay, the tacit patron of my reflection, writes, it is an initial condition to move away from the established masters of understanding the past in order to rethink it in a more compassionate and empathic manner.⁵² In Azoulay's view, opening up to the civic imagination is opening up to the gesture of potentializing history – critical work that involves reconstructing the histories of praxis and desires that motivated the actions of various social actors in the past, yet were ultimately rejected by the scrutiny of the legitimizing discourses. This work uncovers the rules of discourses that enable the suppression or misrepresentation of these narratives in the name of preferred visions of society; and, finally, that points to the new possibilities that arise with the exposure of what was previously overlooked to the public.⁵³

While imperialism, in the context of the considerations undertaken, may not be the most accurate term, Azoulay's call to look into the margins of hegemonic-exclusionary discourses does not lose its operability here. The narratives I have chosen, as I have tried to point out, neither match exactly with communist rhetoric; nor with anti-communist rhetoric, which was the main counterpoint to the introduction and sustaining of political change after 1945, as well as still providing the main frame for the description of postwar

Permanent trace and mechanisms of not remembering], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2016): 15–39; Przemysław Czapliński "Bunt w ramach." The author confronts the treatment of the Martial Law in terms of revolution and uprising, pointing out, respectively, the progressiveness and conservatism of these tendencies. At the same time, he makes space for a third tendency of communicating the experience of the 1980s – the humorist tendency. Indebted to traditions outside the 'canon' of Polish culture, but effectively unsealing the then prevailing division between the authorities and the struggling society, the humor current introduced a third actor into this binary arrangement - the silent majority. However, if in Czapliński's case humor lies at the core of independent culture, which lies within the boundaries of the anti-communist imagination, and thus the final balance producing political subjects, in the case of the narratives discussed here this kind of transformation does not turn out to be the rule and does not formulate new forms of political subjectivity.

52 Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Zone Books, 2012).

53 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

history. The shift towards the everyday and banal civic imagination that they set in motion would thus attempt to overcome this great dualism, which has already been undertaken successfully for some time in the study of various aspects of Polish culture and history. Emphasizing the affective and emotional areas of this imagination, presented here inevitably in a fragmentary manner, would in turn open up to the issue of the structure of feeling as that register of communist reality that still awaits in-depth study.

Abstract

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Is There No Free Love in the Houses Made of Concrete? Intimate Narratives in the People's Republic of Poland

The article deals with the category of intimacy and the possibilities which it opens up in the study of communist culture. In the theoretical plan of the article, the author recapitulates the concepts of an intimate public sphere (L. Berlant), imperial policies of intimacy (A. L. Stoler) and selected cultural definitions of intimacy (I. Illouz, A. Giddens, M. Herzfeld). In turn, in the interpretive plan, the author characterizes selected intimacy narratives from the communist period: songs (M. Jakubowicz), reportages collected in the volume *Who Loves Today...* and selected films (A. Holland, B. Sass, A. Ford, W. Wiszniewski). The article shows how these narratives deconstruct the opposition of the public and the private, and further defines the socialized public sphere of the People's Republic of Poland both as a space for the distribution of political meanings and the reproduction of oppression, and as a space for the construction of formulas of resistance and the denunciation of mechanisms of power. As a result, the article finally points to a category in intimacy that allows us to look at the People's Republic of Poland beyond the dominant dominant (martyrdom-centric, anti-communist, male-centric, etc.) in Polish discourse.

Keywords

intimacy, People's Republic of Poland, public sphere, communism, power