

Witches, Shamans, Pandoras - Representation of Women in the Polish Postcommunist Cinema

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Politics dominated Polish cinema for most of its post-WWII history. Attitudes to the country's past and present were regarded as the most important aspect of the movie, if not by popular audiences, at least by the critics and filmmakers themselves, which resulted in marginalising other discourses. For example, problems concerning genre, class and gender only occasionally featured in film reviews and cinema histories and were typically treated as aspects of the debate about politics, history and national identity (See Appendix 1). Similarly, those directors whose interests were in domains other than history or national identity, never achieved the status of their more politically-oriented colleagues (See Appendix 2).

In the years following the collapse of communism in 1989, history and politics have gradually lost their privileged position both in Polish cinema and in film criticism. Slowly but steadily other issues and other approaches have taken their place, amongst them a discussion along the lines of gender. In film criticism the result has been to accuse filmmakers of silencing women's voice -- an opinion which was hardly expressed in reference to films of the Polish School or the Cinema of Moral Concern (Haltof, 1997: 150-151; Jankun-Dopartowa, 1998: 26-29; Stachowna, 2001). Indeed, in a substantial proportion of films, made after 1989, the presence of women is limited to occasional, short and basically meaningless appearances, such as serving men in a restaurant or selling them a packet of cigarettes from a kiosk.

What about those women who are not only present in new Polish films but play more prominent, substantial roles? What is said about them and by whom? To attempt an answer to these questions is the main task of this paper. Rather than discuss all post-1989 production I will examine two films in detail: *Tato* (Dad, 1995) by Maciej Slesicki and *Szamanka* (Shaman, 1996) by Andrzej Zulawski, which, in my opinion, are representative of two strands in Polish postcommunist cinema: popular and arthouse. It must be added that they are not the only types of films made in Poland after 1989. Another important paradigm are the lavish, heritage films and historical drama, such as *Ogniem i mieczem* (*With Fire and Sword*, 1999), directed by Jerzy Hoffman, *Pan Tadeusz* (1999), directed by Andrzej Wajda and *Przedwiosnie* (*Early Spring*, 2001), directed by Filip Bajon. However, as I recently discussed them in an earlier article (Mazierska, 2001: 167-183), they have been omitted from this analysis. The films made by Polish female directors in the last decade or so have also been excluded, as they deserve a separate study.

***Dad* -- Victory of the "Polish Father"**

Dad was the first film written and directed by Maciej Slesicki and he has since made *Sara* (1997) and a television series *13 posterunek* (*Police Station Number 13*, 1997-2000). Born in 1964, Slesicki belongs to the generation of filmmakers described as "Young Wolves" -- those

born between the late 1950s and the early 1970s who made their first films after the collapse of communism; the name came from the film *Młode wilki* (*Young Wolves*, 1995), directed by Jarosław Zamojda. The leader of the group is Władysław Pasikowski, the director of *Kroll* (1991), *Psy* (*Dogs*, 1992), *Psy 2. Ostatnia krew* (*Dogs 2: Last Blood*, 1994) and *Demony wojny* (*Demons of War*, 1997). Others include Maciej Dutkiewicz, and the actor-directors Olaf Lubaszenko and Bogusław Linda. "Young Wolves" reject the idea, introduced during the time of the Polish School and since then strongly informing the ethos of Polish filmmakers, that cinema is a national service, a vehicle with which to fight for a better society. For them, by contrast, cinema is pure entertainment and therefore the value of films should be measured solely by the number of tickets sold. They do not have much respect for their older colleagues and admire Hollywood cinema, particularly films made by their most famous American contemporary, Quentin Tarantino. According to their own standards of success, they achieved this, making the most profitable Polish films of the 1990s.

Directors belonging to this generation make films, which obey the rules of a particular genre, adapted to contemporary Polish reality. They choose "male genres", such as gangster, thriller or war dramas, where women only provide a backdrop for male activities. Władysław Pasikowski, (who was also the first to be accused of sexism) regards the woman's role in cinema as "to look good" (Bergel, 1988: 77-78). Therefore he always tries to find a pretty, young actress for his films, who, by the time he embarks on a new project, is typically too old, therefore necessitating replacement by a new face. Many of Pasikowski's female characters are also sinister: they betray their lovers with their lovers' best friends or force their husbands to abandon their moral principles to fulfil their huge appetite for expensive goods. There are no memorable female parts in the "Young Wolves" films and no actresses who might be identified with this movement. On the other hand, Pasikowski, Slesicki, Zamojda, used the same circle of male actors, particularly Bogusław Linda and Cezary Pazura, who both played in the genre "classic" *Dogs* (See Appendix 3).

Dad shares many features with the films of Pasikowski and Zamojda, but there are also notable differences. Firstly, although employing some thriller devices, it is not a clear genre production. Secondly, it is not set in a model male world, such as the army, the police, the secret service or the Mafia, but in an environment ignored by Slesicki's colleagues -- the family. Thirdly, it was conceived not as pure entertainment, but as a film with some ideological purpose. According to the director's own words, his inspiration was an article he read in the Polish edition of *Playboy* concerning the Association for Fathers Rights, comprising divorced men, campaigning for equal parental privileges, and then his personal contact with its members. His film was designed to support their cause by demonstrating that men are unjustly discriminated against by the Polish courts (Demidowicz, 1995: 38-40).

The main protagonist in *Dad* is Michał, the young husband of Ewa and father of seven year old Kasia. They form a traditional, nuclear family: he is the breadwinner, working as a cinematographer, she is the homemaker and looks after their child. Their supposedly happy life changes, when Michał comes home one day later than usual. Instead of greeting him, Ewa injures herself and then accuses her husband of violence. Her strange behaviour is the first symptom of what turns out to be schizophrenia. Ewa returns to live with her parents, taking her daughter with her, and files for divorce. This leads to a bitter fight for the custody of Kasia, in which Michał has not only his wife against him, but also his mother-in-law and Polish family law, which favours the mother, whatever the circumstances.

Michal is the one with whom the audience is meant to identify. He is a talented man, who provides his family with a good standard of living, above the level the majority of Poles can afford. Michal, Ewa and Kasia live in a tastefully furnished and spacious flat. Kasia attends a private music school, learning to play the violin. In order to afford these luxuries Michal compromises his artistic ambitions, working not only on films, but also in commercials. Being an attractive man, Michal is approached by young actresses looking for romance, but he tries to resist temptation and remain faithful to his wife. Moreover, he stands by her, even when she treats him with hatred and aggression. Equally, there is no trace of spite towards his wife in his custody battle for Kasia. He does it because he loves his daughter and wants to protect her from abuse.

Ewa is portrayed as a witch: a woman who casts spells and terrifies children. In the first scene she is shown reading a book to Kasia, which is not an ordinary fairy-tale, but a horror story, containing graphic details of torture, inflicted on puppets by werewolves. When Ewa kisses her daughter goodnight, we see that Kasia does not fall asleep, surely because the tale was too horrifying. As time passes, Ewa's condition deteriorates; she becomes more unpredictable, one minute shy and sulky, the next noisy and violent. Suffering from delusions, she attacks people at random and eventually is locked up in a psychiatric ward, but is released at her mother's request. Having discovered Kasia's disappearance, Ewa breaks into the flat where her husband is hiding their daughter and kills his friend, Cezary. She also tries to kill Michal and holds Kasia at knifepoint, but the police intervene and she is returned to the hospital. Ewa's appearance reaffirms her detachment from the world -- she has dark shadows under her eyes and long, straggly hair and prefers darkness to light.

Although Ewa is the dangerous "other", who threatens the order of the family and the wider world (see Creed, 1993, Purkiss, 1996: 79-83), she does not dominate the narrative, as after the episode with Cezary, which is in the middle of the film, she disappears completely from the story. A much more potent adversary for Michal is his mother-in-law. She is also cast by Slesicki as a witch -- an evil woman who steals, imprisons and harms someone else's child. An indication of her possessiveness and cruelty is her refusal to send Kasia to school and the bruises Michal notices on his daughter's body. Ewa's mother hates her son-in-law and is ruthless in her fight against him. She also tries to dominate her own daughter, cutting Ewa off from the outside world. Her own husband, who is shown as being sympathetic to Michal, obeys his wife because he fears her. Interestingly, it is mentioned that Ewa's mother used to work as a teacher. Normally, being a teacher suggests a love of children. However, in Slesicki's film it indicates that she is a schemer, able to use all possible means to gain access to children in order to harm them. The costume and iconography reinforce the witch-like qualities of Kasia's grandmother. She has a puritanical, harsh demeanor, dressed mostly in black with an old-fashioned hat. The door chain, which is meant to prevent Michal from touching and perhaps stealing his daughter, reminds us of the chains used by witches in fairy-tales to prevent children from running away. The most poignant is a scene in which after hearing about the court's decision to take her away from her father, Kasia climbs to the top of the court and stands on a window-sill, pretending that she wants to kill herself. Her grandmother, who tries to rescue her, uses a broomstick to bring her to safety and falls down herself, with the broomstick between her legs. This event marks the fairy-tale like ending -- with his mother-in-law dead and his wife locked in a psychiatric ward, Michal is eventually able to resume his role as Kasia's single parent.

Other women in *Dad* (all of them professional) are not much better than Michal's mother-in-law. For example, the social workers who visit Michal at home in order to assess Kasia's

conditions are utterly philistine, regarding his antiques as dilapidated old furniture. In court they say that they regard Michal as unfit to be a father because they found oil on the kitchen floor and dust under the furniture. The female judge rejects Michal's request to be able to look after his daughter on the basis of his inability to provide a recipe for tomato soup. Another career woman, a television journalist, who follows Kasia's story, is like a vulture, sensationalist and utterly insensitive. The most ridiculed woman is a member of a "Parliamentary Women's Circle" (see Appendix 4) who appears on television, discussing Kasia's disappearance from her grandmother's home. She is not really interested in Kasia's fate, treating her case solely as an example of "female oppression" and moving swiftly to other forms of hardship, suffered by women, such as lack of women in parliament. With her false manners, strange glasses and hairstyle, more suited to a younger woman, she is a caricature of a militant feminist. Michal's lawyer, Magda is the only positive female character in the film. She understands his feelings well as she herself lost a child, when her ex-husband took their daughter abroad and never returned. She proves to be passionate for his cause, but also rational, composed and controlled, when representing him in court. She is the only one with brains. At the same time, divorced and childless, she is a flawed woman. Probably this is the reason why she is made so likeable.

The most complex character is Kasia. She is cute and intelligent and a perfect companion for her father. Moreover, she is the one who brings death to her witch-like grandmother, thus freeing Michal from a miserable life. On the other hand, she reveals many unpleasant features: stubbornness, possessiveness, greed, impatience. There is even something witch-like about Kasia. For example, when she is distressed or angry, she climbs to a high point where she can't be reached by anybody and threatens to jump. The violin she learns to play is another link with dark forces. Kasia does not simply play the violin, but uses it as a medium to communicate what she can't convey in words: fear, sadness, anger. In her hands the instrument emits strange, tearful sounds. With her dark hair, large, dark eyes and thin body, Kasia is very far from the Slavic ideal of beauty and could easily be mistaken for a Romany child. Michal has no doubts where her daughter's bad features come from -- whenever she does something of which he disapproves, he tells her that she is exactly like her mother. However, after spending more time with her father, Kasia gradually loses her bad habits. Staying with her father is portrayed as a way to redeem herself, to save her from her mother's and grandmother's fate.

After Michal loses his first court hearing, he approaches the "Association for Fathers' Rights". The organisation's social spectrum spans from unskilled workers and unemployed men to those who are educated and affluent. This is meant to demonstrate that the problem is widespread, affecting all divorced fathers, regardless of their age, social class and education. In the clubs and pubs, where members of the association meet, women are physically absent and the male discourse is most evident. Stories told by members show that the courts are making terrible mistakes, rejecting men's requests to bring up their offspring. Cezary, the leader of the organisation, admits that he used to drink too much. However, his wife drank even more and sought the company of the workers of collectivised farms (who were widely regarded as the underdogs of postcommunist society), who brewed illegal alcohol. This did not prevent the court from giving her the custody of their son and Cezary lost contact with his child. Cezary claims that since being divorced he has not touched a drop of alcohol. Generally, there is a strong ethos of self-discipline and self-improvement amongst the fathers.

Although the organisation has the word "fathers" in its name, there is hardly any talk of their sons and daughters amongst its members. Ex-wives, not "ex-children", provide the main

subject of male conversation. The children in their discussions never have names, and rarely have gender -- their main function is to serve as a vehicle to express their fathers' resentment against their ex-wives. Men in the "Association for Fathers' Rights" also discuss the more general question of the role of women in society and their eternal nature and value. They argue, for example, that the shift from communism to a free market economy and the financial emancipation of women did not improve the welfare of the family, as women who work outside the home neglect their domestic duties and do not judge their husbands according to their "inner virtues", but by their salaries. Similarly, money became the only criterion to estimate a person's suitability for parenthood, which is the reason why many fathers lose the custody battle, as their ex-wives often earn more than they do. In reality, postcommunism brought a significant worsening of the economic situation of women, with a decline in their average salaries and a dramatic fall in their employment (See Appendix 5).

The men in the "Association for Fathers' Rights" welcome the idea of a woman's role being only that of wife, mother and homemaker, but are unwilling to appreciate it, even when this role is fulfilled. This is most clearly demonstrated when Cezary ridicules the concept of building a monument to the Polish Mother (Matka Polka), arguing that in all countries women give birth, but there are no monuments to Dutch or Peruvian mothers. It is worth explaining that "Polish Mother" is an important national myth, dating from the nineteenth century during the time of Partitions, when Poland did not exist as a separate state (See Appendix 6). At that time men often left their families to fight for their country in the uprisings or wars and the women stayed at home to look after the whole household and to teach their young children their duties towards their country. It was assumed that without the strength and devotion of the "Polish Mother" Poland would not have survived as a cultural community. "Polish Mother" was almost equated with "Polishness", as "Poland" has very feminine connotations, such as the nurturing soil. There is also a strong affinity between "Polish Mother" and "Holy Mother", the highest icon in the Catholic Church -- both selfless and defined not by their sexuality, but by their devotion to their sons. Furthermore, in a similar way to the "Holy Mother", who has power on Earth while her son has command in Heaven, "Polish Mother" executes authority over everyday life, while the men in her family apply their strength to more esoteric tasks.

Myths often express dominant ideologies. The myth of the "Polish Mother" supports the rule of patriarchy by expecting the woman to stand by her man (or the memory of him, if he died in battle) and by claiming that a woman's place at home determines her position in society. On the other hand, as was mentioned, it allowed a certain type of women -- those who conformed to the "Polish Mother" stereotype -- to expect respect from society, even reverence (See Appendix 7). By devaluing the "Polish Mother" and simultaneously denying women the right to find their place outside the traditional roles of mothers and wives, men in Slesicki's film ultimately demote women to the position of second class citizens.

Michal befriends Cezary and eventually moves into his flat, taking Kasia with him in order to prevent her being abducted by her grandmother. Cezary's flat is another place where, literally and metaphorically, the male voice is very loud. When Cezary sees a female member of parliament on TV, asking: "Why are there so few women in parliament or working as company directors?" he answers himself: "Because you are too stupid" and asks Michal: "Would you like such an idiot to be your director?" Cezary also suggests to Michal they emigrate to the Bahamas and marry two native girls, whose crucial advantage over Polish women is their inability to speak Polish. Accordingly, his general opinion about a woman is

that she should be visible, but mute. It is worth repeating that this is the stance which informs the "Young Wolves" whole approach to women.

Cezary perceives the relationship between men and women in terms of continuous conflict. He tells Michal before he goes to court: "This is a war, man. Either we win, or they win." "They" in this case not only signifies Michal's ex-wife and mother-in-law, but the whole female "race". Apart from his important narrative role Cezary performs a substantial ideological function in Slesicki's film. Against the background of Cezary's blatant misogyny, Michal's attitude to women looks progressive. He refuses to take part in Cezary's outbursts of male hatred and keeps repeating that he loves his wife. In reality, however, Michal shares with Cezary the general conviction that women are intellectually inferior to men, only he presents it more subtly. For example, he jokingly tells Kasia, that the Last Judgment will be infallible, because God is a man, not a woman -- in contrast to female judges in the human court, who deprived him of his daughter. When Kasia comes back from school beaten up by a boy in her class, Michal advises her to reciprocate, kicking him in the testicles. He says this is the male's sole weak point, the one which a woman can control. Another indication of Michal's misogyny is his conviction that what is vice for women is a virtue for men. For example, Michal blames his wife for her preoccupation with material things and regards her compulsive consumerism as a major factor in his inability to spend time with Kasia. Ewa is also accused of being unable to see the link between working and earning money. However, when in court, Michal claims that he should be awarded custody of his child, because he has a big flat and a well paid job, in contrast to his wife, who does not have any regular source of income and shares a small apartment with her parents. Another example is his attitude to solidarity -- he suffers no moral dilemma in joining the "Association for Fathers' Rights". On the other hand, he criticises women for sticking together, which he describes as "solidarity of the ovaries" (emphasizing the irrational character of female bonds), as a dangerous conspiracy, causing the world's most awful misery.

In contrast to men, who chat freely in their private space, women are never shown in their own environment -- at home or in the company of friends. They appear only in public places, such as a court or television studio, where they address strangers and are forced to behave in an artificial way, to play certain roles. This puts female characters at a distance from the audience and prevents the articulation of female discourse.

Typical of films made by the young directors, *Dad* is saturated with cinematic references and direct quotes. Apart from providing Slesicki's film with a postmodern "look", they reinforce its patriarchal ideology. References come from two types of film. The first type, a "new man" genre, is used to illuminate the relationship between Michal and Kasia, as in the episode when they watch *Paper Moon* (1973), directed by Peter Bogdanovich in the cinema at the film studio, where Michal works as a cinematographer. There they hide from his colleagues, who want Michal to resume his work. When the colleagues come into the dark room, they crouch on their chairs, preventing anybody from seeing them. This moment establishes Kasia and Michal as a team of conspirators against the hostile world. After the show Kasia asks Michal various questions about the private lives of Tatum and Ryan O'Neal, which suggests that she identifies her father and herself with the couple in Bogdanovich's film. The images of Michal and Kasia's domestic life, filled with the preparation and eating of common meals, resemble *Kramer vs Kramer* (1979), directed by Robert Benton, another film showing a man able to take sole responsibility for his child. However, there is also an important difference -- in Benton's film both father and son, learned to cook; in *Dad* the task of preparing meals is taken solely by Kasia, who in the absence of her mother assumes the role of homemaker.

On the other hand, the sections of *Dad* which feature Ewa are drenched with references to psychological horrors, in which women are represented as monsters. The relationship between Ewa and her mother bears similarities with *Carrie* (1976), directed by Brian de Palma. The former is on one hand passive and submissive, on the other, has powers which are beyond anyone's control. Ewa's mother, on the other hand, although there is nothing supernatural about her, is the true monster in the film. When Ewa invades Cezary's flat and stabs him, Michal, forced to defend himself, drowns Ewa in a bath, but she is resurrected and tries to attack him again, in a scene reminiscent of *Fatal Attraction* (1987), directed by Adrian Lyne. The policeman, to whom Michal explains what happened, comments jokingly: "This is like an American movie, where women are always drowned in the bath and always manage to strike back". The bath scene also has associations with the medieval custom of drowning women accused of witchcraft. It is worth adding that in Poland this custom is preserved to the present day in the tradition of "drowning Marzanna" -- setting fire to a female puppet, made of straw in the last day of winter. Marzanna's demise symbolises the triumph of patriarchal, Christian religion over the pagan, female order.

Casting fulfils a similar function as intertextual cliches -- gaining sympathy and respect for the male cause at the expense of the plight of women. Michal is played by Boguslaw Linda, who can be described as the leading Polish actor of the last decade. Since the beginning of his career he has played in a wide range of films, including the masterpieces of the Cinema of Moral Concern, such as *Kobieta samotna (A Woman on Her Own)*, 1981), directed by Agnieszka Holland and *Przypadek (Blind Chance)*, 1982), directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski, as well as Wajda's *Czlowiek z zelaza (Man of Iron)*, 1981). In the 1990s, however, Linda was associated mainly with police/gangster films, such as the previously mentioned *Dogs* and many later films, directed by Wladyslaw Pasikowski. Linda is also regarded as the most charismatic actor of his generation and attributes part of his appeal to the character and his cause. In her review of *Dad* Bozena Janicka observes: "The audience is on his side from the very first moment. They admire him and identify with him, seeing him as a man who can't have any serious shortcomings... The director did not make any attempt to challenge Linda's myth" (Janicka, 1996: 11). Another very popular actor, Cezary Pazura, plays Cezary. It is worth adding that Pazura had similar experiences to his character -- he fought his ex-wife for custody of his daughter and made many public appearances defending fathers' rights, in a manner not very different from that adopted by his character. Giving Pazura's character the true name of the actor reinforces the identification between them.

Michal's lawyer, Magda is played by Krystyna Janda, regarded as the greatest actress in Polish post-war cinema. She can be described as the female equivalent of Linda. A significant part of Janda's high status both in Poland and abroad results from her leading role in Ryszard Bugajski's *Przesluchanie (Interrogation)*, 1982) and her part as Agnieszka in Wajda's *Czlowiek z marmuru (Man of Marble)*, 1976) and *Man of Iron*. Agnieszka is probably the most powerful female character in Polish cinema -- she is intelligent, active, passionate about her values: freedom, truth, solidarity, which are later embraced by the "Solidarity" movement. Janda's role in Slesicki's film as Michal's lawyer and advocate of "fathers' rights" is instilled with her authority as the icon of (early) "Solidarity". Ewa, on the other hand, is played by a young actress, Dorota Segda, whose most important part before *Dad* was a title role in *Faustyna* (1994) by Jerzy Lukaszewicz, which was the story of a nun, who had visions of Christ. This part, although positive, established Segda as an actress specialising in the roles of strange women, haunted by ghosts. Her mother is played by Teresa Lipowska, an actress who in the past portrayed unpleasant wives and bigoted mothers-in-law. Needless to say, neither Segda nor Lipowska achieved the status enjoyed by Linda, Pazura and Janda.

As I mentioned at the beginning, *Dad* was intended to serve a particular ideological function - to show that women are favoured by Polish law and (as law in democratic countries generally expresses the will of the society) that Polish society is matriarchal. I will argue that in this respect Slesicki did not succeed. On the contrary, his film exposes the depths of institutionalised misogyny in Poland. I do not remember any other Polish film which documents how badly women are treated by those who are meant to protect them. This is shown in an episode in which the police come after Michal's apparent attack on his wife. Not only is he not charged, but one of the officers offers him a cigarette in a friendly manner and advises him in future to learn to beat his wife more "competently", so that her wounds would be invisible. On another occasion Kasia's grandmother, armed with a court order, brings a policewoman to Michal's flat in order to take the girl from her father. In this case not only does the male officer refuse to cooperate with his female colleague in fulfilling her duty, but forces her to leave Michal in peace and treats her extremely rudely, threatening her with cleaning the police station toilets.

Although men claim that women who divorce are treated favourably by the court, at least in financial terms, Ewa does not gain anything by separating from Michal. On the contrary, she loses the large flat and comfortable lifestyle, which she enjoyed as Michal's wife. The question of dividing their property is raised only once, in court. When Michal says that he should be given custody of Kasia, because he has a large apartment and earns plenty of money, Ewa's lawyer suggests that perhaps he should then give the flat to his wife. This is regarded by Michal's lawyer as a sinister joke. The episode in court might be seen as an explanation of why Poland's divorce rate is the lowest in Europe -- if a Polish woman wants to leave her husband, she risks homelessness and poverty. I will also argue that by showing the difficulties Michal faces, juggling work and parenting and eventually losing his job, Slesicki demonstrates that to be a single parent, which in Poland in over ninety per cent of cases is a female predicament, in postcommunist Poland is an extremely difficult task (Titkow, 1993: 254- 255).

Attitudes to women, as presented in *Dad* are, as was previously mentioned, typical of films made by the "Young Wolves". In such films, as *Kroll*, *Dogs* and *Demons of War* by Wladyslaw Pasikowski, women play the role of villain, whom the male protagonist must defeat in order to fulfil his noble objective, such as saving a young soldier from death (in *Kroll*) or rescuing a Bosnian village (in *Demons of War*). Men use them solely for (often violent) sex and keep them in contempt, which is conveyed in the demeaning or offensive names they are given, such as *Suczka* (Little Bitch) or *Cycofon* (Big Breasts) (see Stachowna, 2001). Women in these films allow or even encourage men to treat them roughly. Similarly, women are marginalised and effectively mute or unable to present their argument. In *Demons of War* the "bad woman" is French and she does not understand either Polish or any of the languages spoken by the natives in ex-Yugoslavia. In *Operacja Samum* (*Samum Operation*, 1999), directed by Wladyslaw Pasikowski and set in Iraq, Karen, the beautiful female Israeli agent is depicted as responsible for the misery of a whole group of Poles working there. When she is eventually killed, the father of a young Polish man, who fell in love with Karen, tells his son: "let's assume that she never existed", which can be regarded as symbolic of the males' attitude to powerful women when they are defeated, as represented in Polish gangster films of the 1990s.

It is worth mentioning that in the year it was released *Dad* was the most successful film, both from a commercial and a critical point of view. It topped the box office, its director received an award at the Festival of Polish Films in Gdynia and three awards, given by readers of the

popular magazine *Film* -- for best film and best male and female parts. Although there are usually numerous factors which contribute to the success or failure of a film, I would suggest that the strong, negative female characters were an important component of its acclaim.

Shaman -- Victor or Victim?

Andrzej Zulawski, the director of *Shaman*, belongs to a very different era than Maciej Slesicki. Born in 1940, he worked as an assistant to Andrzej Wajda, before making his first film, *Trzecia czesc nocy* (*The Third Part of the Night*) in 1971. Unable to finish his science-fiction epic, *Na srebrnym globie* (*On the Silver Globe*, 1976) he emigrated to France, where he found a niche as an author of films portraying, as David Thomson put it, the "excessive side of human nature" (Thomson, 1998: 16). Zulawski always regarded himself as a director of women. Indeed, women usually play the main parts in his films and he directed many great actresses, such as Romy Schneider in *L'important c'est d'aimer* (*The Main Thing Is to Love*, 1975), Isabelle Adjani in *Possession* (1981) and Sophie Marceau in *L'Amour braque* (*Mad Love*, 1985). On the other hand, his portrayal of women, as the titles of his films suggest, is usually one-dimensional -- his heroines love madly and tragically and hardly do anything else. Zulawski describes himself as a "progressive" filmmaker, defying all kinds of barriers: political, moral, generic. He even claims that it was this very progressiveness, unacceptable to the Polish censors and the conservative Polish audience of the time, and not, as the official version suggests, financial misdemeanors, which forced him to leave Poland in the 1970s. Although for many reasons, including his French connections, Zulawski cannot be regarded as a typical Polish director, I will suggest that there are important similarities between his films and certain types of Polish art cinema (more so than his famous compatriot, Roman Polanski). For example, one can find some striking similarities between Zulawski's style and the work of such directors as Piotr Szulkin and, more recently, Mariusz Grzegorzek.

Shaman is the first film Zulawski made in his native land in over 20 years, after numerous assertions that he saw no chance of making another film in Poland. His decision to return might be regarded as a sign that Poland has changed, becoming "progressive" enough to accommodate his uncompromising films. The fact that *Shaman* was backed by private finance is also meaningful, as 20 or even 10 years earlier this was practically impossible. The script was written by Zulawski and Manueala Gretkowska, one of the most popular and controversial authors of the young generation, who, in common with Zulawski, lived in France for some time.

Typical for Zulawski, *Shaman* starts with an encounter between two strangers. She, Wloszka, is a student, he, Michal, is a lecturer in anthropology. They meet in the street, where Michal and his brother place an advert for a flat to rent. They are approached by Wloszka, who is looking for somewhere to stay. She moves in at Michal's insistence and almost immediately they become lovers. Their first sexual encounter starts as a rape, when he throws her violently onto the bed, face down. Yet, after some time of suffering pain, her face expresses ecstasy. He, on the other hand, turns up the whites of his eyes, as if losing control of his senses and his whole body. The first lovemaking establishes a pattern -- he initiates the intercourse, but she always welcomes his advances and even provokes them. Soon after their first meeting, Michal takes part in a major archeological discovery -- at an excavation near a steelworks he and his colleagues discover the corpse of a young man. Although three thousand years old, it is perfectly preserved, complete with tattoos on his arms, similar to those on Michal's body. Michal, who leads a team of anthropologists, claims that the man was a shaman and that he died an unnatural death. Testimony to this is the state of his head -- part of his brain appears

to be missing. In trying to unravel the fate of the man, Michal's obsession with the shaman parallels his fascination with Wloszka. He believes that deciphering the enigma of his lover will also solve the mystery of the shaman. As time passes, he becomes more and more detached from reality. He leaves his girlfriend, who is his boss' daughter and moves in with Wloszka. When he is not with his lover, he is in the university laboratory, where the shaman's corpse is kept. Eventually, when drunk and hallucinating, he learns from the mummy that he was killed by a young woman, who was a more powerful shaman than he. This precipitates a resolution to distance himself from dangerous primitive beliefs and become a Roman Catholic priest. When he is about to leave, Wloszka kills him and then eats his brain.

By repeating acts which the ancient female shaman performed on her male partner, Wloszka enters the area described by Freud as "uncanny" -- "those things which relate to a notion of a double: a cyborg, twin; doppelganger; a multiplied object; a ghost or spirit, an involuntary repetition of an act" (Creed, 1993: 53). She also establishes herself as a figure of horror, being an "eternal", archetypal female shaman or a witch. Wloszka's witch-like qualities are also betrayed by her manners -- she never walks, but runs and jumps, making uncontrollable gestures with her hands. When she talks, she makes strange faces, as if trying to threaten her interlocutor, on other occasions she does not answer questions, as if completely sunk in her own, private world. More often than talking, she emits inarticulate, animal-like noises. When she eats, she constantly salivates, spits and vomits; she eats cat food, lying on the floor and swallows raw meat, including dead rats, minced by a machine in the meat factory. In the end, as was mentioned, she eats the brains of her dead lover. Somehow ironically, this is the only meal which she consumes with a spoon. Otherwise she uses only her fingers or her mouth. She clearly enjoys filth as after each meal she tries to spread the food remains all over her body and makes a mess in the house of Michal's boss.

Zulawski's heroine proves her credentials as a witch particularly strongly by her attitude to sex (See Appendix 8). She is never tired of lovemaking; when she does not have a partner, she masturbates. Neither is she ashamed to make love in public places: in trains, on the streets, in the hospital. There is even a scene of her making love in front of two frightened nuns, suggesting Wloszka's pagan hostility to the Christian order. Michal is not her only sexual partner; she also makes love with her ex-boyfriend, and to a colleague from the university. However, only the anthropologist is able to fulfil her sexual hunger. His superiority over her other lovers seems to result from his brutality and his courage in breaking down barriers. When he wants to reach her body, he usually tears off her clothes, he also commands her to perform oral sex and commits buggery on her. She reciprocates by putting a piece of raw meat into her vagina and asking Michal to eat it. This scene bears associations with the classic of "exploitation cinema", *Pink Flamingos* (1972), directed by John Waters. On one hand, sex, performed in public toilets and associated with vomiting and spitting, is totally physical. On the other, it takes the form of a religious ceremony. Michal and Wloszka's lovemaking is always accompanied by loud music, dominated by the sound of drums. When they are achieving climax, the screen becomes lighter and lighter to the point where their figures become hardly recognisable, as if over-exposed. This has biblical associations, with God manifesting himself in the form of illumination.

The ugliness of the sex which Wloszka engages in and the repulsiveness of the hidden parts of her body, on which Michal often comments coarsely, contrast with her external beauty. This beauty is used to attract men; sex then destroys them. It is worth noting here that Michal is not Wloszka's only victim. Another of her lovers, a shy student, who wanted to marry her, is killed by a tram when he pursues her on his motorcycle. The dialectic of an attractive

exterior and a hideous, dangerous interior links Wloszka to another prototype of *femme fatale* -- Pandora (Mulvey, 1996: 53-76). The Freudian associations evoked by *Shaman's* heroine are almost limitless: witch, Pandora, Medusa, the *femme castratrice*, the female vampire and Zulawski unashamedly ladles from the goldmine of their mythologies. One can also detect in her character references to the myth of "jurodiwy" -- the idiot who possesses a special kind of knowledge, unavailable to normal people. This eccentric character found its way into Zulawski's film through the work of his favourite writer, Fyodor Dostoevsky. Wloszka's behaviour also reminds us of figures from Zulawski's own "mythology": "Szerns", living on the moon in Zulawski's unfinished epic *On the Silver Globe*. However, rather than examine the full scale of Wloszka's monstrosity and strangeness, I would like to move on to another question -- her relationship with men and the power she exercises over them.

Michal's attitude to his lover is ambivalent. On one hand, he despises her as being primitive, uncivilised, inhuman. On one occasion he says: 'You are like a machine -- you only eat, sleep and fuck.' He is ashamed when she follows him to work and tries to get rid of her by passing her to another man. On other occasions he tries to "civilise" her, teaching her how to eat with a knife and fork, buying her a new dress and taking her to a party in order, as he puts it, "to show her normal people". In bed, he gives her books to read, and encourages her to participate in university activities -- something she does very reluctantly. Yet, the very same qualities of Wloszka, which he scorns and detests; her lack of intellectual curiosity, her crude manners and, most of all, her addiction to sex, attract him. He regards them as a sign of her being super-human, god-like. He describes her to his friend: "She is so pure, so holy." This fascination is in tune with his concept of civilisation as man's gradual abandoning of his natural faculties and replacing them with technical devices. Michal explains it to his students, saying: "Deprive the cosmonaut of his equipment and he will die in a couple of minutes. Deprive a shaman of everything and he will survive." In the end Michal dies, Wloszka survives, as if he was a "cosmonaut" and she was the shaman.

In a review Jan Olszewski interprets the ending in the following manner: "Making love is for a man a form of prolonged suicide. Sexual intercourse consists of a man getting rid of a substance, necessary to the functioning of his brain... The assumption that a copulating man is the victor in the male-female relationship is based on bottomless naivete on the male's part" (Olszewski, 1996: 63). Is *Shaman* thus a film about the superiority of the female, natural, shaman-like attitude to the world over a civilisation constructed by men and based on the power of the brain? The director himself claims that the female discourse prevails in *Shaman*, that his film is about woman's victory. 'Of the two characters, she is the one who is right... I noticed that the audience is infected with the energy of my heroine... He, on the other hand, is dead' (Chyb, 1996: 36).

This interpretation is challenged by Olszewski, who claims that, in spite of the ending, it is not a man but the woman who is the true victim in *Shaman*. Olszewski's argument is primarily based on the way the film is cast. Boguslaw Linda, who plays Michal "brings to the film his myth of a physically and emotionally strong man, who always gets what he wants... Wloszka, on the other hand, is played by a young person with no acting experience" (Olszewski, 1996: 63). Olszewski, whose main concern is the fate of the actress, Iwona Petry, argues that her experience had to be traumatic and degrading, somehow evoking the memory of another actress, playing a young woman who killed her older partner -- Maria Schneider in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), directed by Bernardo Bertolucci.

In the short review of *Last Tango in Paris*, included in the *Time Out Film Guide* we find such statements: "Mostly the film is Brando's... The monumental narcissism is still there, coupled with the inability to take himself seriously... Against him, Schneider hasn't a chance, which says a lot about the imbalances of the film; Bertolucci doesn't seem too interested in her either" (Pym, 1998: 482). If the names Brando and Schneider are replaced by Linda and Petry, we will get an accurate description of the power equilibrium in Zulawski's film. I will even argue that *Shaman* is much more Linda's film than *Last Tango in Paris* was Brando's. Moreover, Linda's acting is not only narcissistic, it is on the verge of Camp. He parodies his roles as a man whom women cannot resist and who finds them boring.

Casting is not the only means by which the supposed female superiority is challenged. Another is mise-en-scene and point of view. Wloszka spends most of the time in her rented apartment, which is ugly and cramped. Some of the furniture is covered with dust sheets, suggesting that she is not allowed to use them, that she does not control her own space. Being confined, she is condemned to passivity. Indeed, as Zulawski claims, Wloszka is energetic, but her activity reminds us of the movements of a lion, locked in its cage -- constrained and futile. There is also a difference in physical levels between the characters; Wloszka is usually placed lower than Michal, crouching on the floor, lying on the bed, sitting on the toilet. She looks at Michal from below, he looks at her from above. Olszewski compares this to a dog-master relationship (Olszewski, 1996: 63). Laura Mulvey observes that "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (Mulvey, 1992: 751). This statement accurately describes the relationship between Michal and Wloszka -- he is a man of action, she is the object of his look. The love scenes are particularly worthy of attention, as in them she is fully displayed for his and the audience's gaze, no part of her body sacred from the spectator's stare. He, on the other hand, is treated by the camera with the utmost discretion, his naked chest the highest reward for the female audience. There is also a significant difference in the way Michal/Linda is treated by the camera and Wloszka's other lovers/actors playing them, who are shown in full nudity. I will suggest that this emphasises the superiority of Michal over his lover. Michal dominates Wloszka's even when he is away: she prepares her body for their sexual encounters, shaving her genitals in order, as she puts it, "to look like a statue" and waits for him in their flat semi-naked. He, on the other hand, has a significant life of his own, spending long hours in his office, examining the mystery of the shaman. It can be also argued that his interest in Wloszka is not really in herself as an autonomous entity, but in himself as a potential "shaman", a double of the man who died three thousand years ago. She is simply an instrument for his self-discovery. From a slightly different perspective Michal's encounters with Wloszka can be regarded as an extension of his professional duties.

The rule that women live through men, but not vice versa, applies to virtually all other characters in the film. Similarly, as in the case of Wloszka and Michal, a man does need to be around to control women's life. When Wloszka visits her mother, who lives in a shabby house, in a small, provincial town, she keeps talking about her desire to marry a foreigner and shows her daughter photographs of potential fiancés. She also mentions her ex-husband, who was a brutal alcoholic -- the dream of a foreign prince is supposed to make up for the mistakes of her youth. Another man-centred woman is Michal's fiancée, Hania. She goes abroad to work as an architect, but comes back, because she cannot live without Michal. Moreover, in order to regain him, she tries to imitate Wloszka, behaving in a hysterical, exaggerated and "over-eroticised" manner. On the other hand, men, such as Michal's boss and personal mentor, who is a professor of psychiatry, and his colleagues, live through and for their careers. There is also a sense of solidarity and community between Michal and his

colleagues; they work together and spend time together after work. In contrast to men, women compete with each other and hate one another -- Hania is jealous of Wloszka, Wloszka's mother hates her own daughter and vice versa.

As in *Last Tango in Paris* and many of Zulawski's own films, particularly *Possession* and *Trzecia czesc nocy* (*The Third Part of the Night*, 1971) the space in which the characters lead their lives is a site of violence, solitude and alienation. Trains are dirty and full of lecherous drunkards, flats are either empty or cramped and full of rubbish, the steelworks where Wloszka gains her work experience looks like hell, hospitals are like Victorian asylums with patients chained to their beds and nuns parading in large, white hats. Warsaw, where most of the narrative is set, consists of dark underground passages and walls, covered with graffiti, containing Fascist messages. Even Warsaw's landmarks look grey and depressing.

There is no doubt that Zulawski's vision of life in contemporary Poland is selective and highly distorted. However, in all its subjectivity, *Shaman* shares a common attitude to women with the majority of Polish films of the 1990s, which aspire to be treated as "art cinema". In such features, as *Femina* (1991) by Piotr Szulkin, *Deborah* (1995) by Ryszard Brylski, *Rozmowa z czlowiekiem z szafy* (*Conversation with a Cupboard Man*, 1993) by Mariusz Grzegorzek and *Bialy* (*Three Colours: White*, 1993) by Krzysztof Kieslowski, love is depicted as a destructive force and female protagonists as dangerous predators or agents of destruction, unaware of their power. The majority of them not only live through love, but are prepared to kill for it and/or to sacrifice their own life at its altar. Equally, work, career, money, social service, politics, even family cease to matter for them when they fall in love or discover the pleasures of sex. At the same time there is a complete lack of films showing women who "have it all": career, money, high social status, families and attractive partners, as if for a woman combining love with any other activity or state of mind is an impossible task.

Conclusions

Mainstream Polish cinema is largely patriarchal. This remains the case, as I have tried to demonstrate, for the two tendencies in Polish films of the postcommunist period. However, the ways to articulate the dominant ideology and, accordingly, to represent gender divisions, changes with time. In conclusion I want to summarise the main divisions between the way women are represented in the films which were the focus of my attention in this article, and in films of the earlier periods of Polish cinema.

The first difference concerns the rejection in the films of Slesicki and Zulawski of the vision of a united society in which women and men work together for a common objective, such as, for example, winning a war, defeating communism or simply surviving a time of economic hardship. Unity in *Dad* and *Shaman* is replaced by the war of the sexes, where women play the role of the "other", the dangerous opponent of man, whom the audience would love to see punished. Although cracks in this image appeared in the Cinema of Moral Concern, on balance this conciliatory vision prevailed in the whole post-1945 history of the Polish cinema until the end of communism. The alliance of men and women is also portrayed in films, made in the 1990s and 2000s by filmmakers of the older generation, such as *Pierscionek z orlem w koronie* (*The Horsehair Ring*, 1994) and *Wielki Tydzien* (*Holy Week*, 1995) by Andrzej Wajda or *Za co?* (*For What?*, 1995) by Jerzy Kawalerowicz, as well as in some heritage films, such as *Pan Tadeusz* or *With Fire and Sword*. However, the fact that they are not set in

contemporary Poland, but in its more or less distant past, incline me to treat them rather as posthumous children of earlier periods, than a vital part of a new Polish cinema.

The most obvious explanation for this transition refers to Polish history, particularly the disappearance of common enemies, such as the Nazis and the communists. This affected men to a greater extent than women, as men played a dominant part in combating the enemy and women only helped them to perform their duties. When the old adversary was defeated, a new one had to be found. Women, at least partially, were given the ungrateful role of replacing the old evil. I would argue that this shift of gender roles applies not only to cinema, but also to the political discourse. One can find an interesting analogy between the transformation of "Solidarity" and the trajectory of the "Polish man" on screen. The first changed from an inclusive, popular movement into a right-wing party, promoting the patriarchal, anti-liberal values of the Roman Catholic Church, the second moved from the knight fighting for his country to the "angry, young man" confronting his wife or his mother-in-law. However, it is worth stressing that in Polish films where women are cast as opponents of men, the conflict between them is very unbalanced -- men in such films typically dominate the whole narrative and win in the end.

Secondly, the directors of *Dad* and *Shaman* are more interested in "woman" than in "women", women as types than woman as an individual. They pay more attention to nature than to culture/history as determinants of female behaviour and fate. The introduction of myths of the witch, doppelganger and Pandora to the Polish cinema, as well as putting more emphasis on the sexual attributes of women at the expense of other characteristics, determining their place in society, is a testimony to this tendency. To put it metaphorically, the place of Marx in contemporary Polish cinema was taken by Freud. Again, titles, such as *Historie miłosne* (*Love Stories*, 1997), directed by Jerzy Stuhr, *Porno* (1990) and *Ajlawju* (1999), both directed by Marek Kotorski and *Sztuka kochania* (*Art of Love*, 1989), directed by Jacek Bromski accentuate the importance of eroticism. At the same time professional women or women involved in political activity (who are besides a true rarity in the new Polish films), are typically ridiculed as narrow-minded, unfeminine, selfish or to be pitied as utterly unhappy. Examples include *Koniec gry* (*The End of the Game*, 1991), directed by Feliks Falk and *Komedia malzenska* (*Marital Comedy*, 1994), directed by Roman Zaluski. Even in *Dzieci i ryby* (*Kids and Fish*, 1996), directed by Jacek Bromski, widely regarded as one of the most female-friendly Polish films of recent years (Jankun-Dopartowa, 1998: 26-29) it is suggested that motherhood is much more important for a woman than her career.

"Over-sexualisation" of Polish women can be explained as making up for the time when in the official culture (of which cinema constituted an important part) public problems mattered more than private secrets and when being "feminine" and attractive was regarded as a sign of women's vanity. At this time women were typically represented as working outside home. This new approach also mirrors the tensions between the official postcommunist discourse on femininity, led by the Roman Catholic Church, which gained in strength as a political force after 1989 and attitudes to women promoted by Western or Westernised mass media, such as the popular press, advertising and foreign films. The fact that in the films of the 1990s the majority of women are defined by their excessive appetite for sex can be regarded as an act of rebellion against the official culture and conforming to the Western, liberal stand. On the other hand, the fact that women who indulge in extra-marital sex, as well as those who sacrifice their family or prospects of having one for money, career or fame are typically punished, suggests that the seeds of the right-wing approach to woman's place landed on fertile ground.

The indifference towards the peculiarities of the situation of Polish women, in the majority of films, is also connected with a larger issue -- the problem of the articulation of the present day by contemporary cinema. The previously mentioned phenomena of the younger directors turning to genre, the older ones "revisiting the Polish School" and the explosion of heritage films in Poland are testimony to filmmakers' helplessness in depicting post-communist reality (Kolodynski, 1997: 33- 35). However, it is worth remembering that the best Polish films about the Second World War, those which created the Polish School were made not immediately after the war, but 10-15 years later. Similarly, it can be hoped that the 1990s are not completely lost for cinema, but might serve as a theme of interesting films in the future. Whether women will be portrayed differently in future films, remains an open question.

Appendix One

For example, the myth of "Polish Mother" is typically discussed in terms of Polish national identity. See Ostrowska, 1998: 419-435.

Appendix Two

Domination of the historical/political discourse over other approaches is, in my opinion, the main reason why Andrzej Wajda and Andrzej Munk, rather than Wojciech Has or Jerzy Kawalerowicz are regarded the leaders of the Polish School.

Appendix Three

The vast majority of Polish critics agree with the opinion about sexist attitudes, rendered in the "Young Wolves" films. However, Michael Stevenson in his analysis of Pasikowski's *Dogs* suggests that the film reveals "gender uncertainties" typical to Polish postcommunist cinema and culture at large, rather than plain misogyny. See Stevenson, 2000: 138-149.

Appendix Four

The "Parliamentary Women's Circle" was formed in 1991, stemming from the "Solidarity" movement. Its main goal was to fight against the abortion bill, which was brought to parliament by the Christian National Party and supported by the bulk of "Solidarity" activists. Soon it became an object of fierce attacks by the Roman Catholic Church and most of the media as an organisation of feminist extremists, dangerous for the whole "social fabric". Slesicki's portrayal of his character perfectly emulates the popular perception of the circle's leader, Barbara Labuda.

Appendix Five

Anna Titkow, writing in the early 1990s noticed: "Women looking for jobs form half of the unemployed, but the number of offers to them is seven times smaller than that for men. In addition, in the reorganization it is the office staff, primarily women, who are typically the first to be fired. Women are compelled to qualify for new jobs, but they have little chance of finding one... and unemployment is increasing." See Titkow, 1993: 255.

Appendix Six

The most probable source of the term "Polish Mother" was a poem *Do Matki Polki (To the Polish Mother)*, written by Adam Mickiewicz in 1830, which in an ironic way discussed the fate of the mother who brings up her children to martyrdom. See Walicki, 1982 and Ostrowska, 1998.

Appendix Seven

The issue of the status of "Polish Mother" is a controversial one. For example, Ewa Hauser, Barbara Heyns and Jane Mansbridge observe: "From a feminist perspective, the Marian tradition in Poland provides meager benefits mingled with heavy costs. The tradition does accord women a special dignity that many feel helps account for the national stereotype of the 'strong' Polish woman. That strength implies independence and self-reliance. But the cult of Mary portrays the center of a woman's life in the home, as a procreator." See Hauser, Heyns and Mansbridge, 1993: 263-264.

Appendix Eight

There are many perceptive studies of the witch as a sexual predator. See, for instance, Kristeva, 1982; Creed, 1993; Purkiss, 1996.

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Credits

Tato (Dad, 1995)

Director: Maciej Slesicki, producer: Lew Rywin, screenwriter: Maciej Slesicki, director of photography: Andrzej Ramlau, editor: Ewa Smal, production designer: Barbara Nowak, composer: Przemyslaw Gintrowski.

Cast: Boguslaw Linda (Michal Sulecki), Dorota Segda (Ewa Sulecka), Ola Maliszewska (Kasia), Teresa Lipowska (Jadwiga Fornalczyk, Michal's mother-in-law), Cezary Pazura (Cezary Kujawski), Krystyna Janda (Magda), Renata Danciewicz (Kasia's teacher).

Szamanka (Shaman, 1996)

Director: Andrzej Zulawski, producer: Janusz Dorosiewicz, screenwriter: Manuela Gretkowska director of photography: Andrzej J. Jaroszewicz, editor: Wanda Zeman, production designer: Tomasz Kowalski, composer: Andrzej Korzynski.

Cast: Iwona Petry (Wloszka), Boguslaw Linda (Michal), Agnieszka Wagner (Anna), Pawel Delag (Juliusz), Alicja Jachiewicz (Wloszka's mother).