Gender/ Feminist Perspective in Film Studies

Although, there have not been a long tradition of using gender perspective in Polish film studies, it must be emphasised that such research was extensively done by numerous academics such as Alicja Helman who introduced feminist film theory to the Polish academic environment, Elzbieta Ostrowska in her research into the issue of gender and Polish nationality and Grazyna Stachowna who examined Polish mainstream cinema of 1990s in terms of gender stereotypes. The main purpose of using gender/ feminist perspective in the research into Central and East European Cinema after 1989 would be to survey the issue of gender in post-communist realities. After tracing the theoretical background such research can draw on more detailed film analysis and pay closer attention to the socio-cultural mechanism that is responsible for gender representation in cinema.

The crucial argument for supplying gender perspective to film studies is the necessity of both new methodology and terminology that provide proper tools to realise, understand and deconstruct stereotyped gender models and strengthen stereotyped views of men and women and their position in the society. Such an examination of cinematic conventions can be used to revise traditional way of interpreting gender roles and to acknowledge viewers with complexity and arbitrariness of gender representation. Instead of restoring stereotyped film
genres, new readings can offer an alternative interpretation of mainstream cinema and its practices. The way of conducting gender oriented film studies is much more characterised by a will to understand rather than to judge, to explore and explain rather than to argue. Thus, it becomes possible to observe an interactive relation between the socio-cultural mechanism of gender categorisation and the way of constructing gender representation in cinema.

There have been a lot of changes both in political and social life in Poland and other Central and East European countries since 1989. In every country, however, the collapsing of communism can not be seen as a single historical event from the past, but must be examined in terms of psychological and cultural process of permanent evolution that apparently situates itself within mental and psychical structures of whole society.

Hitherto, gender aspect of widely understood European identity have been always formed by strongly fixed conventions, mostly very stereotypical, defining social male and female roles. In fact, they have been inseparably associated with historical events, religion and conservatism that all together led to establish the ideal image of European citizen from Central and East European block.

Noteworthy, changes connected with free market, capitalism and democracy have not been immediately followed by mental openness and preparation to re-define gender and national roles. In consequence, there are still remains of stereotypical interpretations of male and female position within Central and East European society that are consistently popularised and consolidated by media and popular culture.

Judging by Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Ukrainian or German cinematic production of 1990s it seems that contemporary images of film characters just confirm traditional model of gender identity that one is obliged to follow. Moreover, there are no attempts to offer any alternative notion. Fortunately, there are also examples of films showing a dynamic struggle between old and new models of life, identity, mentality that characterises Central and East European post-
communistic realities. The main aim of gender oriented research into cinema is to analyse the mechanism of creation and eventual re-creation of gender identity that tends to function as the most stereotypically fixed notion. Such approach to analysis of gender identity would not be possible without comparative and interdisciplinary studies, providing necessary background to analyse selected films and their relations to particular realities and states of mind. Originality of such proposal arises from its interdisciplinary character, that makes possible to join different perspectives and to notify the complexity of gender category. There is no need to say that cultural, social and psychological aspect of gender must be put into much wider discussion about identity in contemporary world. Central and East European cinema excellently illustrates the process of re-thinking social and cultural notions of identity. It is particularly interesting to follow how cinematic discourse reflects discussions about identity: national, cultural, ethnic or gender, and then to find out how the issue of identity is situated within the context of permanent changes that have been taking place in Europe since 1989. Although consequences of these evaluations are difficult to predict, especially that most of them take places in mental, rather then physical structures, their results are assumed very visible forms, for example in films and media.

It is particularly fascinating to confront different re-interpretations of gender that can be noticed in film plots and characters of contemporary cinema. Recent Central and East European films seem to be an excellent illustration of the new reality established after 1989, the question is if it is followed by the new concept of identity.

**Film Analysis**

As far as Polish cinema is concerned, its model can be described as a mixture of mainstream conventions and artistic strategies of individual filmmakers. Consequently, images of male
and female figures usually combine both universal cinematic genres and subjective interpretations. Moreover, the way of representing men and women in Polish films has been always reflected by the cultural, social and political context, as well as by the psychical and mental structures of Polish society.

Therefore, male and female representations are untidily connected with the historical and catholic context that led to establishment of the ideal image of the Polish brave fighter (always male) for freedom, justice, faith etc. and the proud Polish- mother who patiently waits for him at home, taking care of the children. The variety of men and women’s images seems to be limited to very few models easily identified in terms of common stereotypes. The individual style of contemporary filmmakers- especially the female ones- can be clearly noticed in their attitude towards gender in their own films. The very common strategy is to re-construct male and female images and to re- define gender roles. As a consequence, female directors of 1990s. such as Magdalena Lazarkiewicz, Dorota Kedzierzawska have managed to create original portraits of interesting women.

On the one hand, Polish cinema tends to confirm the traditional representation of gender. On the other hand, there have been many examples of films showing a dynamic struggle between traditional and original models. Both tendencies may be clearly noticed if only one confronts the different cinematic genres that have been used by female filmmakers to create an image of the Polish woman of nowadays. In order to understand the artistic strategies that were chosen by particular female directors, it is necessary to analyse their work in context of the artistic movements in Poland, as well as the political and social situation. All films in addition provide a great deal of information about the ideology, the politics and realities of post-communist Poland.

Dorota Kedzierzawska is an excellent example of a female filmmaker who consistently concentrates on the separateness and individuality of the female subject and attempts to
present her individual world through her personal history, experience, feelings, thoughts, and also her social status and the cultural and political context. In order to speak in a new way about women’s lives Kedzierzawska re-conceptualises the traditional interpretation of gender roles and shifts from fixed conventions to subjectivity and modality of creativity. In her works, she claims to link traditional methods and formal means of expression with an individual stylistic breaking with the universal patterns of women’s representation. Her film Nic (Nothing, 1998) was inspired by an authentic story of a woman who killed her new born child because her beloved husband did not want to be a father for the fourth time. In front of the court, the mother was asked if she has anything to say; in reply, she said: “Nothing”. Instead of making a realistic documentary about the whole case, Kedzierzawska created a poetic vision evoked by warm sepia-colour photographs, scenery, music and sensitive acting. It is obvious from the very beginning that the story would focus on the pregnant woman, portrayed as a wife emotionally addicted to her husband, rather then as a criminal. In Nic, Kedzierzawska replaced the male point of view by a female perspective, through which she represented the complexity of women’s emotions and feelings. Thus, the life experience of an ordinary woman became the main subject of the narration.

Nic, to some extent, recalled the strategy of female artists to subvert genres and put into discussion the fixed patterns of gender representation. Using conventional portraits of women embodied by the suffering Polish Mother, the sex bomb who shamelessly enjoys her new love affairs, and an old, sceptical woman, Kedzierzawska created her own variant of what really happened. Neither the actuality nor the reality of the events was her priority. What she strongly emphasised was the uniqueness of a woman’s character that may not be simplified and reduced to any universal schemes.

One of the most significant feature of Polish female cinema of 1990s is the emphasis on often neglected women’s issue, and the fact it discusses them from a female point of view. In their
films, female directors attempt to present both individuality and separateness of each character. Simultaneously, they put subjective stories into a wide cultural and social context that helps restore the specificity of female characters and at the same time, re-interpret stereotypical representation of gender.

Similar strategy can be found in Czech cinema, represented by the latest works of Vera Chytilova. Growing from the Czech new weave movement, she has consistently addressed the issue of gender in each of her films. Although *Sedmikrasky* (*Daisies*, 1966) and *Pasti, Pasti, Pasti, Pasticky* (*Traps*, 1998) were made in completely different contexts, both these films by Vera Chytilova can be seen as a kind of continuation, especially in terms of female representation. First of all, they present interesting, unconventional portraits of individual female personalities. Furthermore, they paint an excellent picture of Czech culture and society described from an alternative point of view, that during years has been shared by non-conformists, artists and intellectuals. Questioning the importance and the value of any order or system- political, social, cultural- Chytilova’s films were in deliberate revolt against cinematic genres and dominating notions of representation. As a filmmaker, Chytilova has worked out her own style which she uses consistently to create a subjective vision of female individuality. Drawing on the typical structures of Czech culture and cinematic tradition she emphasised the uniqueness of each ”self” and the distance that can exist between the individual interpretation of gender and its social interpretations.

Throughout *Daisies* and *Traps* Chytilova persistently explored complex relationship between the gender identity of her female characters and the repressive, patriarchal structure of the society they belong to. Although not many feminist projects existed in central and east European cinema when she began to critically comment the conventional male-dominated culture, Chytilova’s opinions can be regarded as very close to that orientation. This feminist approach is a main feature of her films, which are all in some way notable for being
representative of women’s "counter cinema" and its revolutionary methods. Based on formal innovation and avant-garde experiments, most of these methods drew primarily upon tradition of European new wave and were taking apart or deconstructing the methods of classical cinema. Chytilova’s artistic strategy, so clearly presented in films like *Daisies* and *Traps*, puts her among other female filmmakers who have deliberately deconstructed traditional methods in both fiction and documentary accounts in the belief that cinema cannot simply and transparently reflect women’s experience, but it is always necessary to construct versions of that experience.

Questioning traditional definitions of gender identity, Chytilova revises conventional images of women and replaces them with their alternative versions. She expands the area of interests from particular characters to the whole culture and social structures. Rather than a story of two self-centred girls *Daisies* should be considered as an interpretation of cultural and social mechanisms in which femininity is repressed by strict models and notions that one is obliged to follow. In such a structure, there could be no place left for free expression and creativity, nevertheless, Chytilova consistently departs from the patterns of mainstream cinema and the process of cinematic communication by subverting the representation of women. On closer inspection *Daisies* and *Traps* appear to be more about being a women in patriarchal structure in general than a simply plot.

Judging by these two films, Chytilova has been obviously influenced by the feminist movement and its counter-cultural ideas that make her interested in women’s experience of life and the way in which gender and sexual identity are stimulated and formed by cultural, social and mental notions and stereotypes. Many anthropologists consider gender symbolism to be basic to all cultures. Some of them, like the Czech culture presented in *Daisies* and *Traps*, have highly elaborated complex notions of gender, regulating virtually all aspects of social life and defining everyday activities and social roles.
In *Traps* a young vet is raped when her car breaks down and she is forced to hitchhike. Following the rape, she feigns amnesia and tricks her attackers back to her house where gives them drinks spiked with sedatives and then uses her occupational skill to castrate them. Her revenge is not enough to free memory of her attack, and she becomes increasingly desperate to seek justice for the pair. They in turn try to cove up their crime and adjust to their emasculated existence.

In showing the consequences of the brutal rape in *Traps*, Chytilova is greatly concerned about portraying another aspect of some apparently objective norms. Above all she wants to present how gender stratification reflects the common organisation of Czech society and is reinforced by the shared normative systems of Czech culture. Furthermore, she stresses that the social roles assigned to women and men are not simply different, but also differently evaluated and differently rewarded.

As some of feminist theorists argue, there is a strict hierarchical ranking of sex groups that separates activities and behaviours of males and females, and what males do is more highly valued and differently estimated that what females do. Such thinking supplies a motive to the end of *Traps* when the men responsible for the rape are declared to be not guilty while their victim is accused of having an asocial attitude and sent to be hospitalised in a psychiatric clinic. In *Daisies*, Chytilova’s position towards gender, however, seems to be more ironic and distanced than respectful, which is reflected in her filming strategies. In *Traps* she goes much further, and overpowers viewers with a conclusion that is not only sceptical but also pessimistic. The ending shows how gender is reproduced in each generation and in social institutions. She critically comments on the stability of cultural notions and contemptuously defines the range of stereotypes.

On one hand, in portraits of her rebel heroines, so free and independent, there is no place for a limiting definition of gender roles. On the other hand, what appears on the screen
is a vision of a very painful confrontation between idealism of "angry young girls" and the
down-to-earth realities that imprison them in a cage of conventional female features and
qualities. In spite of their strong individuality, women in *Daisies* and *Traps* are forced to
sanctify and respect patriarchal order. Although they try to reject its rules, everyone expect
them to follow the gender stratification in order to comply with requirements and expectations
of the whole society.

Feminist theorists intensify and enlarge the volume of research on sex differences,
Furthermore, they also place emphasis on the learning of sex roles arguing that most of them
are inducted by environmental pressures and reality of social, cultural and economic context.
Although contemporary filmmakers might not be automatically identified with feminist
theorists, some of them share the opinion, and consistently believe that the social
expectations, rules and norms attached to a person’s position in society usually force
individuals to conform to them through identification with the parent of their particular sex.
Kedzierzawska, Chytilova and other filmmakers from post-communist block¹ try to show
how, in such circumstances, counter interpretation of gender is often limited to very personal
aspects of life and might not be extended to its social and cultural context. Female cinema
seems to be openly targeting a spectator who prefers multiple readings and interpretative
freedom over fixed model of perception. The willingness to talk about one’s own feelings and
experience gives the films of women an unique, intimate character. Moreover, it help female
artists to avoid “traps” of gender conventions and achieve unlimited freedom of constructing
their gender identity.

¹ Much more detailed analysis of Polish and Czech films might be found on
www.kinoeye.org/index_02_08.html and www.kinoeye.org/index_02_0.html
Dr Malgorzata Radkiewicz,
The Jagiellonian University, Institute for Audio Visual Arts
Pilsudskiego 13, 31-110 Krakow, Poland
radkiewi@theta.uoks.uj.edu.pl