

DOI: 10.19195/2082-8322.11.5

Arkadiusz Lewicki

ORCID: 0000-0003-0484-2849

University of Wrocław

Transgender/transvestitism/ cross-dressing in Polish cinema

Although the three above-mentioned terms are rather semantically close to each other, and sometimes, especially in the colloquial discourse, they are even treated as synonymous, the difference between these particular concepts is worth mentioning. Transgenderism would be the broadest concept, concerning a change (very often a permanent one), related to shifting from one gender to the other. This shift often involves a surgical sex alteration, in which case the term transsexualism becomes applicable, meaning a biological sex change. The term “transsexualism,” according to Andrzej Zwoliński, “was introduced in 1949 by a French researcher, Caudwell,”¹ and

the first sex reassignment surgery was performed in Germany, in 1930 (a Danish artist, Einer Wegner became Lily Elbe), however, it ended tragically. The surgeries, this time combined with hormonal therapy, were brought back in the 1950s in Denmark. In Poland such surgeries have been performed since 1963, when, as a result of this kind of procedure in Międzyzylesie, in Warsaw, a man became a woman.²

In Poland the first female-to-male sex reassignment surgery was performed in 1983 in the Plastic Surgery Clinic in Łódź.

The term transvestitism, on the other hand, is slightly older; it had already appeared in the writings of the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld in 1910. The aforementioned Zwoliński defines the concept with the following words:

¹ A. Zwoliński, *Seksualność w relacjach społecznych*, Kraków 2006, p. 150; unless otherwise indicated, translations from Polish are the author's.

² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

The term “transvestitism” (Latin *trans* = across, over; *vestis* = clothing, dress) denotes a maniacal tendency to dress in the attire of the opposite sex, thus manifesting identification with that sex, despite the lack of any biological basis for that.³

Undoubtedly, there is a sexual factor within this concept; dressing in the garments of the opposite sex is marked with the need for (gender and sexual) identification with the opposite sex.

Finally, cross-dressing does not have to be related to persistent sexual needs; it has a casual or occasional character; it does not interfere by any means with sexual identity whatsoever; it is rather an artistically justified dress-up (drag queen) or connected with an urge to get away from reality or to present oneself as a totally different person.

The themes related to gender identification changes have appeared in the cinema since its very beginning. Different kinds of “dress-ups” have been one of the most common forms of flouting heterosexual norms. At the same time, they were derived from the forms of vaudeville entertainment or burlesque theaters, where “the comedy of errors,” including those connected with erroneous gender identification, takes place. Already in the period of “the cinema of attraction” there were actors who even specialized in playing female roles. Gilbert Saroni, for instance, acted only in female clothes and played in the films *The Old Maid Having Her Picture Taken* (1901) or *Meet Me at the Fountain* (1904). Men dressed up as women also appear in the pictures produced by the Bamforth Company, entitled *Women’s Rights* (1899), however, the elements of identification with the gender whose clothes are worn by male actors are hard to notice. In the picture *Behind the Screen* (1916, dir. Charles Chaplin), Edna Purviance plays a girl who puts on a male outfit in order to get a job. Although her kiss with David, played by Chaplin, astonishes the director of the film set, who observes the situation, the viewer, just as the protagonist, has no doubts even for a moment that this is only a comic dress-up, and not a real attempt to change gender.

Polish cinema from the period before World War II also used patterns from the comedy of errors eagerly, including errors based on incorrect gender identification. These kinds of themes are evident in at least five movies from the early stages of Polish sound film. *Is Lucyna a Girl?* (*Czy Lucyna to dziewczyna?*, 1934) directed by Juliusz Gardan and *The Lottery Prince* (*Ksiąźątka*, 1937) by Stanisław Szebe and Konrad Tom (who was also the screenwriter of the former film) are examples of stories in which the girls — Jadwiga Smosarska, one of the biggest stars of Polish pre-war cinema in *Is Lucyna a Girl?*, and Karolina Lubieńska in *The Lottery Prince* — are forced to dress up as men, which results in a series of hilarious situations but is also a chance to question various types of norms. A similar thread can be found in the film which started “the golden era of Jewish film” in Poland and was entirely made in Yiddish — *Yiddle with His Fiddle* (*Jidl mit’n fidl*, 1936, dir. Jan Nowina-Przybylski, Joseph Green). On the

³ Ibid., p. 151.

one hand, these films have always been deemed (especially *Lucyna*) as an important voice in the debate about the (mainly) professional emancipation of women, on the other, they have even been called camp films by some researchers,⁴ because they actually question the dominant, heteronormative paradigm. Both Gardan's film and *The Lottery Prince* show episodes in which we have scenes balancing on the verge of breaking (but rather not explicitly transgressing) a homosexual taboo. It was very strong in Polish cinema. However, even in American and European film — with just a few exceptions, for instance the film *Different from the Others* (*Anders als die Andern*) from 1919, by Richard Oswald — it also appeared with big intensity and was broken in a similar way. Regarding sexual ambiguity, both *Is Lucyna a Girl?* and *The Lottery Prince* were similar to films such as *Mademoiselle Amy Jolly* (1930) with Marlena Dietrich or *Queen Christina* (1934) with Greta Garbo. For in all of these Polish films there are kisses which have a potentially homosexual character. Eugeniusz Bodo (playing a lover in both of the productions) kisses women who are still constantly wearing male garments, and it is unclear whether within the boundaries of diegesis he is aware of the fact, which in turn is obvious to the viewer, that he kisses a woman, not a man. In both productions (actually, in all three, because it also concerns the film in Yiddish with Molly Picon) the dressed-up female characters are also seduced by women. Although being in accordance with the convention of the time, the courtships have chiefly a verbal and not pictorial character, they do walk a thin line that separates the patriarchal norm from its transgression.

Slightly less transgressive elements can be found in the episodes from *Romeo and Julcia* (1934) directed by Jan Nowina-Przybylski, in which one of Poland's most important classical cinema actors, Adolf Dymśa, dresses up as an eccentric girl from America who comes to Poland. The situation is rather a chance for total mayhem in the Marx brothers' style than for breaking any taboos. Maybe the famous scene from *The Apartment Above* (*Piętro wyżej*, 1937) by Leon Trystan is much more transgressive. The aforementioned Eugeniusz Bodo creates "Mae West made in Poland" during a masked ball and "sings the lines of the hit song *Sex Appeal* with unfeigned pleasure,"⁵ and then, just for fun, seduces his hateful neighbor — Hipolit Pączek, who does not recognize him.

The era of socialist realism brought (at least apparent, though guaranteed by article 66 of the constitution from 1956) equality of men and women. In the films of propaganda significance, as Piotr Zwierzchowski notes, "the space for a fully politically conscious woman, who actively joins the creation of a better reality, could not have been neglected."⁶ In spite of the communist party using emancipation slogans on

⁴ K. Kosińska, "Manewry tożsamościowe. Kobieta jako mężczyzna i mężczyzna jako kobieta," [in:] *Ciało i seksualność w kinie polskim*, eds. S. Jagielski, A. Morstin-Popławska, Kraków 2009, p. 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶ P. Zwierzchowski, *Zapomniani bohaterowie. O bohaterach filmowych polskiego socrealizmu*, Warszawa 2000, p. 129.

posters and in propaganda films, and women actively joining in construction works (often literally, as female brick layers, for instance) of socialism, by no means did it cause any major disruptions related to gender identity. Although Hanka Ruczajówna (played by Lidia Korsakówna) — the protagonist of the socialist realism comedy *Adventure at Marienstadt* (*Przygoda na Mariensztacie*, 1954, dir. Leon Buczkowski) finally puts on her dream work outfit and joins the reconstruction of war-damaged Warsaw, she still remains a woman and the drill overalls are just a work garment, not a symbol of gender identity.

Symptomatically, not only did the Polish People's Republic censor political matters, but also morality and sexuality. According to Brian McNair:

In the Soviet Union and other non-capitalist societies inspired by its example, sexual censorship was equally severe, if justified not by reference to God's will and Christian morality but a secular, Marxist-Leninist ethic of work and sacrifice within which the public celebration of sexuality was seen not as sinful but as a bourgeois deviation.⁷

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that between the years 1945 and 1989 only a few films took up (however, similarly to the pre-war cinema mainly in comedy convention) the problem of gender identity changes. The most famous example is Stanisław Bareja's comedy from 1972, *Man — Woman Wanted* (*Poszukiwany, poszukiwana*), in which Stanisław Maria Rochowicz (Wojciech Pokora), hiding from the law, dresses up as a woman and starts work as a domestic help. Mary's hilarious adventures perfectly exemplify the picture of Polish society of the early 1970s. The households where the protagonist gets hired are "a real array of human types" which is derived in a way from the pre-war drama tradition, which, in turn, comprised the contemporary critics' objections.⁸ Nonetheless, the film contains some sexually ambiguous scenes, stemming from forced transvestitism, which, on the other hand, slightly resembles *Some Like It Hot* (1959) by Billy Wilder, and which is the Polish film protagonist's everyday reality.

The second distinct transgender thread can be found in a cinema blockbuster from the early 1980s — *Sexmission* (1984) by Juliusz Machulski. The story of two men who have been hibernating for 50 years and wake up in a world where there are only women ends in a surprise twist, when it turns out that Her Excellency, who has ruled the world consisting only of women in an authoritarian manner, is in fact the only man (Wiesław Michnikowski) that has survived the explosion of the X bomb. The film, made in the times when the communist censors decided to loosen the Comstockery in Polish cinema — a fact mentioned by Izabela Kalinowska, for instance⁹

⁷ B. McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire*, London-New York 2002, p. 51.

⁸ M. Replewicz, *Oczko się odlepiło temu misiui. Biografia Stanisława Barei*, Warszawa 2015.

⁹ I. Kalinowska, "Seks, polityka i koniec PRL-u: o cielesności w polskim kinie lat osiemdziesiątych," [in:] *Ciało i seksualność...*, pp. 63–78.

— offers a few comedy constations concerning gender identification, functioning in contemporary Polish (maybe in a broader sense — Western) society, which, however, from today's perspective would be deemed as a fine manifestation of patriarchal society. Machulski also used transvestitism elements of the plot in his next comedy, in *King Size (Kingsajz, 1988)*, where Witold Pyrkosz plays Zenona Bombalina, the female editor of *Grasshopper* magazine. However, Artur Majeran maintains “this maneuver bears no significance whatsoever, and it should be perceived only as a mere [...] reference to the previous [...] work,”¹⁰ that is — exactly *Sexmission*.

Another very interesting example of a transgender dress-up comes from the children's cinema of the Polish People's Republic. *A Boy and a Girl (Dziewczynyna i chłopak, 1980)*, directed by Stanisław Loth and Marian Kiełbaszczak, which was a cinema version of a two-year older TV series for teens, is the story of the title twins who, by coincidence, have to impersonate each other throughout holidays spent in two different places. Despite there being obviously no erotic threads in the film, it is still a fine example of gender stereotypes functioning in the socialization process. Tosia Jastrzębska (Anna Sieniawska), a model girl from the late 1970s: well-mannered, tidy, with excellent school grades, but at the same time delicate and a little bit timid, has to pretend to be her own brother in a forester's lodge in the middle of the forest. Furthermore, she has to win the acceptance of the boys in company — her cousins. On the other hand, Tomek (Wojciech Sieniawski), a typical rascal, a dawdler, has to pretend to be his own sister for two weeks and try to behave as a girl would. The film shows perfectly that in a patriarchal society the more positive characteristic is attributed to the values traditionally ascribed to men. It is Tosia, though more intelligent than her brother, who in fact has bigger problems in adapting to the new surroundings. Tomek simply pretends to be a girl-urchin, which is much easier in the village conditions than being a boy-milksop.

As the aforementioned McNair puts it:

In Gorbachev's Soviet Union, conversely, as in post-Franco Spain and other transitional countries (i.e., in the process of transformation from authoritarian regimes of the left or right to democracies) the decline of political censorship led to a long-overdue liberalization of sexual culture.¹¹

Hence, after the political changes there was a shift related to a bigger openness, also that concerning gender identification problems, within Polish cinema, albeit, generally, comedy is the only film genre that has dealt with the issue thus far. *Złoty środek (Golden Mean, 2009)* by Olaf Lubaszenko directly refers to the pre-war tradition of comedy. Two different comedies — *Mission: Goat (Operacja Koza, 2000)* by Konrad Szołajski and *Swap (Zamiana, 2009)* by Konrad Aksinowicz — are based on the idea that appeared in the film world already in 1914 in Sidney Drew's work *A Florida Enchantment*, a screen adaptation of Archibald Claverling Gunter's novel

¹⁰ A. Majeran, *Kino Juliusza Machulskiego*, Bielsko-Biała 2014, p. 109.

¹¹ B. McNair, op. cit., p. 106.

in which gender transformation occurs as a result of swallowing a magical seed. The transformation in Szałajski's film is a result of a scientific experiment of personality swapping between two bodies, a method developed by an adjunct professor, Adam Horn (Olaf Lubaszenko). Interestingly though, the numerous gender transformations that happen in the film are rather a means of ridiculing Polish politics at the turn of the century, showing the war between intelligence agencies (Russian intelligence is involved in stealing the gender transformation formula), and not highlighting transgender issues. The film *Swap* is politically engaged in a similar way. The plot revolves around the president-macho who has had sexual intercourse with transsexual Kamil/Kamila (Joanna Liszowska), after which the former starts changing into a woman, his wife subsequently transforms into a man and runs in the presidential election as her husband's counter candidate. However, also in this film gender transformation is rather an opportunity to play crude jokes, including a literal exposure of the presidential couple's nudity, which happened in front of TV cameras already after the swap, than a deep analysis of the gender issue.

A slightly more fathomed transgender thread appears in the film *The Perfect Guy for My Girl* (*Idealny facet dla mojej dziewczyny*, 2009) by Tomasz Konecki. The work offers a splendid array of gender issues: the female protagonist is bisexual, a Polish lesbian association is going to make feminist porn, a pilgrimage of virgins on stilts bites the dust because none of the virgins reaches the target, the male protagonist's devotional aunt discovers she is a lesbian, and, at the same time, the protagonist's father turns out to be transgender — professor Ryszarda Katzówna (Krzysztof Globisz), an ardent feminist activist. It seems that exactly professor Katzówna was the first transgender character in a Polish film to have decided upon gender transformation not as a result of a cross-dressing mistake or a random scientific experiment, but in a fully conscious and responsible manner. Unfortunately, though, she was also depicted in a rather stereotypical and non-multidimensional manner in Konecki's work.

Actually, real and sophisticated transgender or transsexual characters were not introduced until the last decade within the documentary film scene. *Trans-action* (*Trans-akcja*, 2010), an HBO production, directed by Sławomir Grünberg i Katka Reszke, tells the story of Anna Grodzka, who in 2011 became famous as the first transsexual person in Poland and Europe to have been elected a Member of Parliament. However, the documentary depicts slightly earlier times, and the camera accompanies the protagonist in the last stages of the transformation process, both the surgical alteration and court trials, during which the formal reassignment of the new gender takes place. Not only is the film focused on a single case but — due to the fact that Grodzka was the chairperson of Trans-fusion foundation, dealing with transgender people's problems — it also highlights a wider spectrum of looking at the whole issue and the problems of the milieu.

A little bit more of intimacy characterizes the docufiction *Call me Marianna* (*Mów mi Marianna*, 2015) by Karolina Bielawska. This picture also portrays the pro-

cess of gender transformation which the protagonist is undergoing. However, while Grodzka receives much support from family and friends in *Trans-action*, Marianna, on the other hand, has to struggle not only to get into a satisfying body, but also against the dislike of her environment and later on against a stroke that hampered her motor skills to a great extent. The film was advertised by a poster asking the question: “How much can you sacrifice to be yourself?” and probably the question itself contains the main issue of the picture — the fight of the individual for the right to self-determination. Despite the fact that the film is a case-study, at the same time it is an important voice in the debate about transsexualism.

It is noteworthy that only documentary films have taken up transsexual issues in a more in-depth way in recent years. For throughout the whole history of Polish cinema the subject has appeared only in one genre — in comedy. The cross-dressing or transgender mistakes in the vast majority of this genre of pictures were neutralized by the film endings in which the world returned to its old, usually “patriarchal” order. Nevertheless, Karolina Kosińska observes, admittedly, though, in regard to pre-war comedies, which can be generally expanded to all of the aforementioned works:

Even if the films that have been analyzed herein in the end adapt potentially subversive content by satisfying the mainstream film norms, even if they finally try to neutralize and weaken it, this subversion is constantly present, awaiting the viewers who would be willing to bring it to the surface.¹²

In such a traditionalist, Catholicism-rooted, and, despite many various changes, still patriarchal society as Poland, any form of crossing boundaries is subversive. Hence, even if all the aforementioned films meet the standards of the cinema of genre film, which aims for balancing between culture and counterculture, destroying and at the same time strengthening social norms, and which films are not always perfect works of art, their existence is still noteworthy. For they are often a partial and unsuccessful reference to the theses of Judith Butler, who recognizes gender in her book *Gender Trouble* from 1990, and what Olga Tokarczuk summarizes in the preface to the Polish edition of the work

as a sort of a performance. Gender is something that we constantly create, do in our everyday life, and the identity of the subject is always performative, coming to existence through repetitions, and thus being liable to vary and to be unstable.¹³

Lucyna/Lucjan, Władzia/Władek, Bodo singing *Sex Appeal*, the presidential couple from *Swap*, professor Katzówna from Konecki’s film, in different ways, they all seem to remind us of this not always immediately obvious truth.

¹² K. Kosińska, op. cit., s. 41.

¹³ O. Tokarczuk, “Kobieta nie istnieje,” [in:] J. Butler, *Uwikłani w pleć. Feminizm i polityka tożsamości*, trans. K. Krasucka, Warszawa 2008, p. 8.

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Transgender/transvestitism/cross-dressing in Polish cinema

Summary

The first Polish film taking up the problem of cross-dressing was a comedy from 1934, titled *Is Lucyna a Girl?* (*Czy Lucyna to dziewczyna?*) by Juliusz Gardan. In the history of Polish cinema there were a few more films about transgender/transvestitism. The paper describes these films and indicates what type of socio-moral influence changes the way of showing this type of characters and themes.

Keywords: Polish film, cross-dressing, transgender/transvestitism