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(Hi)Story for the Youngest. Adaptations of Children's Literature Made by Polish Female Directors

The popularity of historical films in the Polish People's Republic is prolifically documented (*Mały Rocznik Filmowy 1988*, 1989) and well-established in the pop-cultural awareness of local audience. An overwhelming six out of seven Polish films running for an Oscar nomination at the time, fit within the scope of the historical genre¹. With regards to viewership, two other films that ranked within the top ten of the period are adaptations of novels catering to a younger audience – *W pustyni i w puszczy* (*In Desert and Wilderness*, 1973) directed by Władysław Ślesicki and *Akademia Pana Kleksa* (*M. Blot's Academy*, 1983) by Krzysztof Gradowski. This box-office data may appear to hold little weight, however, it provides an insight into the themes that captivated the attention of viewers and creators at that time. The cinema drew inspiration from literature, great historical production figures were very popular, and young people flocked to frequent features based on required reading books, which were mostly adapted by female Polish directors like Maria Kaniewska, Halina Bieleńska or Wanda Jakubowska.

¹ Starting with the costume-drama *Nights and Days* (1975) directed by Jerzy Antczak, through the iconic *The Promised Land* (1975) by Andrzej Wajda all the way to the political *Pharaoh* (1965) by Jerzy Kawalerowicz. Such features as *Knights of the Teutonic Order* (1960) directed by Aleksander Ford or (also nominated for an Oscar) *The Deluge* (1974) by Jerzy Hoffman could boast the highest attendance of their time. It is worth noting that both films are adaptations of equally prominent novels by Henryk Sienkiewicz.

The subgenre of historical film for children and adolescents could be placed at the intersection of these three elements, which is predominantly represented by adaptations of renowned books. Using the term “historical production” to refer to films aimed at a young audience could be seen as quite conventional. While they are far removed from the most representative works within this genre, they nonetheless meet its most basic requirements (*Słownik filmu*, 2005, pp. 81–82) – even though these productions appear to gravitate more toward fairytales (Kurpiewski, 2017, p. 146) and fantasy films. The narrative arc takes place in the past, the characters don period-costumes, some films feature historical figures. Similar to the once-fashionable variety of historical films, the so-called “supergiants” (Litka, 2003, p. 407), actual historical facts are taken quite liberally, at times even being disregarded or negated altogether. The creators of such films do not generally aspire to redefine the genre, they tend to focus largely on simplifying the plot, and ensuring it is attractive and comprehensive for an audience of any age. As Piotr Kurpiewski points out: “the director’s intent behind those *historical* productions was strictly educational, and it aimed primarily to let the young viewers obtain some knowledge of history through watching the film” (2017, p. 146). The same goes for the popular required reading books, which were the basis for the most esteemed children’s films.

Costume films, such as *Godzina pąsowej róży* (*Hour of a Crimson Rose*, 1963) directed by Halina Bieleńska, or Maria Kaniewska’s work, aside from merely educating, broadened horizons, able to reach far beyond the sealed, hermetic vision of history compliant with the leading political party. This is evident in the number of awards and honourable mentions granted to those films during international festivals dedicated to the young audience². Despite the fact that nowadays their popularity has clearly faded, and they appear much less frequently on the TV schedule, authors of monographs spare them less attention, downplaying their value or significance³, these films have withstood the test of time, not merely by virtue of sentimentality, but indeed through the aforementioned content universalisation and the attractive form of entertainment cinema. Historical productions for children were not only captivating for the young audience, but for the creators as well.

² *Argument about Basia*, *Satan from the Seventh Grade* received several awards at IFF for Children and Adolescents in Venice, and *The Hour of the Crimson Rose* aside from the Venice award, was also given a Special Honourable Mention at IFF for Youth in Cannes.

³ “One can certainly claim that this body of work appears somewhat meagre [...] though it does possess a certain charm” or according to M. Maniewski (*Kino dla mugoli?*, „Kino”, no. 6, 2001) “Films for children are seldom talked about – since who would want to tend to such trifle?”

“Back then everyone was making children’s movies, because it was the safest subject both politically and performance-wise”, said Andrzej Wajda (Krubski, Miller, Turowska, Wiśniewski, 1998, p. 34). Indeed, contemporary Polish cinema came to feature numerous works aimed at children and adolescents. Ranging from animation, through narrative pictures, up to educational films and documentaries distinctive for the period. Nearly every director would work with young actors – professional and otherwise – at the start of their career. Nonetheless, oftentimes the filmmakers would diverge from children’s film, and their ventures may only be regarded as practice or a curious titbit in the “more mature” filmography.

Only a few would remain true to the child audience, as represented by Kazimierz Tarnas, Stanisław Jędryka or Janusz Nasfeter. Among the creators involved in children’s film there were also a number of women. Their presence is decidedly significant. Krzysztof Tomasiak (Tomasik, 2004) points out in one of his writings, that such a great (compared to the entirety of Polish cinematography) number of women-filmmakers engaged in creating films for children is not a random occurrence. Aside from political or technical matters, other contributing factors were institutional and discriminatory issues. Female directors as women were attributed with motherhood – supposed to assume the role of caretaker (Talarczyk, 2013, p. 322), which linked them to being “delegated”, to cater to the younger audience. Their ventures towards a change in repertoire were usually less acknowledged and esteemed than those of their male peers.

Among them, there was a considerable group of female directors who had found their place in Wanda Jakubowska’s film unit called Start⁴. Under the watchful eye of the director of *Ostatni etap* (*The Last Stage*, 1984), Maria Kaniewska and Anna Sokołowska created the majority of their young audience-focused films, such as the historical *Awantura o Basię* (*Argument about Basia*, 1959), the criminal *Szatan z siódmej klasy* (*Satan from the Seventh Grade*, 1960) or the teenage contemporary drama *Beata* (1964). Most renowned novels for young people were transferred onto the screen at that time. Directors, who nowadays appear nameless even for the viewers who grew up on their films, would reach for prose that is still enjoyed today. Children’s books written by Janusz Korczak, Kornel Makuszyński or Maria Krüger and later teen novels by Małgorzata Musierowicz, Irena Jurgielewicz and Krystyna Siesicka were adapted to the screen.

⁴ Another significant centre, where many children’s films were created, was Studio of Small Film Forms in Łódź. The creators who realised their projects there were, among others, Jadwiga Kędzierzawska and Janina Hartwig, who directed several doll-theater versions of poems for children – *Tadek Niejadek* (1957), *Dwa Michały* (1958).

The aforementioned historical films constitute an interesting category of films for children of that period. Maria Kaniewska in particular would become an expert in this subgenre, after many years coming to be referred to as “classic” (Talarczyk, 2013, p. 322). Halina Bielińska is also noteworthy for her contributions, as well as Wanda Jakubowska herself, with her picture *Król Maciuś I (King Matt the First, 1957)*.

Several decades before the extraordinarily popular adaptation of *Akademia Pana Kleksa (Mister Blot's Academy)* rolled into theaters in the 80s, a screen version of Janusz Korczak's prominent novel earned its viewership among young people. Based in a fictional realm existing outside of time, with a surreal – theatrically unnatural even – stage design, which was remarkably effective nonetheless, the story in question is more of an allegoric fairy tale, than an exemplary representative of historical film. Be that as it may, the production displays a kind of ambition that mirrors the content of its literary origin. Though clad in costume, the characters describe strife, that both adults and children struggle with in real life. Although Jakubowska's version skips or abbreviates some story arcs⁵, the director does not shy away from addressing serious, not exactly politically-correct issues.

A young boy is going through losing his father. The king, having been through a severe illness, dies. Matt has to take over the reign from his parent, which meets with reproach from those associated with the throne, particularly an array of officials who have no intention to allow a 10-year-old to rule by himself. An attitude at odds with how the boy is perceived by his subjects:

“The truth has to be said: Matt was liked by all. The elderly pitied him, for such a young child has lost both his parents. The boys were happy that at least there was one of them, that everyone had to obey, before whom even generals have to stand at attention and adult soldiers present their weapons. Girls fancied the little king on an elegant horse. And above all – he was beloved by orphans” (Korczak, 1998, p. 11).

It is power and the various ways to exercise it that is the prevalent theme of the film – rather than the process of dealing with grief after losing a parent. The boy fights for his rights, struggles to solve military conflicts, negotiates with leaders of adverse nations, agrees to establishing a child government, is manipulated by a journalist, only to eventually suffer the consequences of actions he was not entirely liable for. His career path, although somewhat simplified and exaggerated, does not differ much from the circumstances of actual

⁵ One meaningful lack would be, for instance, omission of the scene depicting the workers' riot.

rulers known from history. Neither Korczak nor Jakubowska are demure in their storytelling, beside the somber, contemplative moments, we witness ones that a modern audience may find shocking – for instance the foxhole scene, where Matt sips on alcohol with a friend, or the one that shows the toddler Felek lighting a consecutive cigarette. The children in both the film and the novel resemble adults, though they are sometimes meaner, rude, and prone to fight. The little monarch is the one who embodies kindness, along with his entire childlike naivete and innocence. He is open to dialogue, tries to be tolerant, soaks up knowledge, but due to his gullibility and honesty, he falls victim to manipulation and exploitation.

In both the film and Korczak's work, the most vital decisions are made in spite of Matt, who, regardless of his best intentions, in most cases remains a passive participant of circumstances that happen around him. A moment that manages to illustrate this remarkably well, is one of the crucial scenes taking place in the child government. The young representatives are unable to come to any sort of agreement. Matt observes the situation from the sidelines, he does not intervene – when out of nowhere, one of the boys starts to insult the girls, the other boys join him, until Klu-klu manages to speak. The girl is a foreigner in Matt's country, she is the daughter of a chief of an African tribe the minor monarch has been associated with. In a few words Klu-klu brings up the issue of equality. Unfortunately, a positive message of equality gets quickly shouted down and turns into a fight among the children. Jakubowska conveyed it in just one short scene, while Korczak describes the girl's principles across the span of a few chapters, where shrewd Klu-klu complains about the white people's customs and the limitations placed upon her female peers, such as uncomfortable clothes and long hair⁶ (Korczak, 1998, p. 205). She is also a keen student, and is not afraid to throw rocks or use a bow. (Korczak, 1998, p. 207).

In a way, including a character like Klu-klu may be regarded as a positive thing, yet the girl does have a problematic background. The African tribe the little heroine belongs to, used to be cannibals. They only changed their cannibalistic ways upon meeting benign Matt. Korczak actually comes close to praising colonialism, whose representatives "civilized" the Dark Continent⁷. What was already powerful in the written form, on the screen hits with even

⁶ "-Why do the boys here dress differently from the girls? That's such a savage custom. That's why your girls are so clumsy. Can't even climb a tree or jump over a fence. The unfortunate dress always tangles and tangles."

⁷ A similar theme can be found in another required reading book – *In Desert and in Wilderness* by Henryk Sienkiewicz.

more force – the actors playing the tribesmen are painted black. Which makes for quite an obvious – and derogatory – association.

Treated as a “contemplative fairy tale” (filmpolski, 2019) – the film version of *King Matt I* attains entirely new meanings. True to the essence of its literary origin, the adaptation is strikingly bold in bringing up problematic topics, including political and social ones, while at the same time it presents disturbing racism and violence one would not expect to see in a production aimed at such a young audience.

Panienka z okienka (A Lady from the Window) – the screen version of a well-known 19th century novel by Deotyma, is certainly aimed at a more mature audience. Supposedly, it was religiously read by consecutive generations of adolescent girls. The story of its heroine evolved into a legend and came to be symbolic for the city of Gdańsk. Nowadays, the book is reached for far less frequently, in fact even Maria Kaniewska’s film is falling into disregard. The 1964 feature spanning over two hours in length, differs significantly from its literary source. It is a classic historical film, where dramatic battle scenes were replaced by political intrigue and a highly developed romantic storyline. The director expanded a secondary story arc, and replaced the issues concerning ritualism and sacrum with an economical/political dispute over customs duty between the City Council and a royal envoy.

Both the film and the novel take place in seventeenth-century Gdańsk. Fifteen years prior to the actual storyline, two young noble girls have been kidnapped by Tatars. Their families fall into grief, unable to cope with the loss of their children. Years later, the abducted girls’ brothers get involved in searching for them. In Deotyma’s work this plotline of finding the missing girls is less emphasised, themes of romance and intrigue are much more prominent.

Kazimierz Korycki, servant to king Władysław IV, arrives in Gdańsk. The man has not intended to spend much time in the city, however, he changes his plans abruptly, upon accidentally spotting a beautiful girl in a window of one of the tenement houses. The title young lady is under the custody of a wealthy merchant, Johann Schulz. The older man is a widower and plans to marry his foster daughter – whose circumstance is tied closely with the kidnapping.

Kaniewska strives to make the narrative much more dynamic and modern. Aside from the romantic arc between Kazimierz and mysterious Hedwiga, a second one unexpectedly unfolds, nearly as extensive, concerning the romantic relationship between Kryśia and Zbyszek Struś. It is readily apparent, that both of these women are the mentioned missing girls, and the men are their

brothers. A similar theme appears on the pages of the novel, but the second affair appears in the third plan and functions as a colourful complement to the spectacular union of two feuding noble families. In contrast, the director creates two juxtaposed pictures of young women. Hedwiga – who turns out to be the missing Marysia Strusiówna – is an ethereal blonde, with her subtle beauty and timid personality that entrances nearly every man around her. The passive damsel from a merchant tenement finds a polar opposite in the daring Kryisia. The girl has a pronounced emancipative potential, she is not afraid to give up a comfortable life in the countryside and go to the rescue of her beloved. Without hesitation, she sheds her feminine clothing and puts on a male costume, and she is no stranger to a sword when necessary. Even though Hedwiga is the center of attention of most men – her stepfather would fancy her as his wife, she is desired by his helper, but the girl's heart beats faster only at the sight of Kazimierz – it is Kryisia that possesses the nerve and spirit that the heroines of historical productions of that period lacked.

One may find an equally remarkable heroine in *The Hour of the Crimson Rose*. Ania – or Anda, as she is called in the novel by Maria Krüger – is a feisty teenager who happens upon an unexpected journey through time, into 1880. The film by Halina Bielińska⁸ is one of the most interesting examples of production for young people based on the theme of time travel. Similar in this aspect is *Pierścień księżnej Anny* (*The Ring of Princess Anna*, 1970) by Maria Kaniewska, where three boys from the 1960s accidentally end up in a Teutonic monastery from five centuries earlier. In Kaniewska's film, historical characters and events are mixed with fiction introduced by heroes from the future. In Bielińska's, we have pure fiction, in which history is not as important as the *fin de siècle's* code of conduct.

Ania is an ordinary teenager, the daughter of two doctors. The girl has trouble with mathematics and dreams of a career as a swimmer. Instead of solving homework, she would much rather spend her afternoons at the pool, which would certainly not delight her parents. The teenager comes up with the idea to outsmart them, by rearranging the hands of an antique clock. A seemingly innocent deception yields unexpected results. Surprisingly, the heroine is transported from a modern apartment in the capital, into a nineteenth-century forest near Warsaw, where a female figure known from the clock awaits her. The woman turns out to be her great-aunt. Initially, Eleonora would act as a guide around the world of a bygone era, but very soon she would disappear from the heroine's life, condemning her to fend for herself.

⁸ Maria Krüger's sister in real life.

The encounter with 19th century lifestyle is acutely jarring for the adolescent girl. It's not just the whole materialistic aspect – with a spacious home, multi-course meals, carriages and servants or uncomfortable dresses and corsets, but most significantly the demeanour and social position of women. Or rather – lack thereof. In both the book and the film, which remains a fairly faithful adaptation of Krüger's novel, the theme of women entangled in patriarchal cultural patterns stands out as one of the most prevalent. A crucial scene illustrating this point, takes place in a boarding school for wealthy maidens. The attending girls are mainly being prepared to become resourceful and dignified wives, who will tell an occasional rhyme in company, or “make homemade meat” (Krüger, 1994, p. 55). On the other hand, science subjects – such as mathematics – are too difficult for the fair gender (Krüger, 1994, p. 55), which Ania is informed of when, out of the entire classroom, she is the only one to correctly solve a problem. The headmistress condemns all manifestations of insubordination, including the ability to think independently and express her own opinions.

The ability to be submissive is a highly valued feature in women considered for marriage. Ania's older sister, who within the few first scenes of the film, surprises her parents by bringing home a beloved man she has just married, in the 19th century is amenable to become the wife of a wealthy friend of the family, who they chose for her. From the start, the aging fiancé seems disagreeable to Ania, the girl notices he is far from perfect husband-material for her sister. Ewa is quietly suffering, but aware of the restrictions placed upon women of the time, she agrees to an arranged marriage with the rich man. Ewa's fate changes out of the blue, when her true love receives an inheritance and is able to ask for her hand. What has the hallmarks of a happy ending, is yet another manifestation of the oppression of that system. Ania is quite aware of this – in the book she remarks on her sister's acting aspirations. Ewa is not the only one involved in a marital-type storyline though – Ania herself gets implicated in one, due to her great-aunt's scheme. The clock that has the ability to transport her back into contemporary times, will be given to her only after she gets married. Although Ania is assigned an attractive bachelor, whom she likes and knows in her own time, she is not exactly in a rush towards the ceremony. The heroine keeps rebelling, undertaking continuous attempts at acquiring the clock on her own terms.

Notwithstanding being dressed up in costumes, the film version of *The Hour of the Crimson Rose* is a great picture about adolescence, abundant in both humorous and melodramatic elements. Despite the modern emancipative

theme, and a pronounced criticism of patriarchy, in the end everything boils down to marriage.

The said criticism, though it appears bold on the level of social convention, completely disregards the political aspect. In both the book and the film, there is no mention of the difficult position of the then non-existent Poland, what is paramount is the social standing, which is to be provided by a good husband. The situation changes with the beginning of the 20th century, to which Bielińska devotes a little more space than her sister. Suspicious premises, poverty, disappointment with the beloved husband of her sister and rescue from poverty on the part of Aunt Eleonora, change the perspective and way of thinking about the previous era. Still, the best place to live seems to be the 1960s Warsaw, even in spite of the cramped apartments.

Without a doubt, Maria Kaniewska transfers the 1968 novel *Mania Lazurek* by Hanna Januszewska onto the screen, with the exact same premise at heart. *Zaczarowane podwórko* (*The Enchanted Backyard*, 1974) is a unique, within Polish cinema, combination of musical, historical film and a film for children. It amazes with its ingenuity, although it is clearly an epigone of its predecessors, it lacks sophistication, distinguished characters, and the songs, instead of being memorable, are at times somewhat silly. What stands out as the most curious and thought-provoking, are the subtle discrepancies between the book and the film.

In Mokotow-Warsaw in a charming neighbourhood, lives Mundek and his friends, along with their guardians. A couple of their neighbors are a professor at one of the capital's universities and a librarian with whom the mysterious Mania Lazurek would soon come to live. The appearance of the girl arouses widespread interest among children and provokes a series of unusual events, the heroes of which are historical figures such as Anna Jagiellonka, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Karol Stanisław Radziwiłł or little Tadeusz Kościuszko.

The backyard from Kaniewska's film is colourful, bursting into song and safe. A pleasant, young militiaman makes sure of the latter. The officer – who is a new addition compared to the literary source – is helpful and gallant. Certainly, his presence is meant to shine a positive light on the public image of contemporary law enforcement representatives, especially considering the casting of celebrated Janusz Gajos⁹ in this role. The director, not unlike Januszewska herself, steers clear of problematic subjects. The history lesson a young viewer will take from the film, boils down to depicting the accomplishments of

⁹ In the same film Janusz Gajos appears on one of the photographs as a renowned and popular actor.

Polish nobility, exemplified in the scene with Radziwiłł singing of his victory in Gibraltar, or playful scenes with the queen, and the football rolling from the Polish backyard into her court. What's missing are the tales about the Partitions, even though it is the time of The Nutcracker's author's stay in Warsaw, or the events of World War II.

The Enchanted Backyard, *The Hour of the Crimson Rose*, or the merely referred to *Princess Anna's Ring*, are films that can be researched in one of two ways – considering the depiction of historic actuality, or focusing on the representation of the chosen period's everyday life. First of all, one may compare which topics were readily tackled, against those discussed less frequently, or avoided altogether, as well as taking a closer look at the heroes' attitudes towards the state of our country at the time. Teenagers' preoccupation with Sienkiewicz's novel and the battle of Poles against the Teutonic Order is a far safer subject than recounting the Soviet occupation, or raising religious issues (Kurpiewski, 2017, p. 150). There is a noteworthy lack of references to the political situations in both the chosen period and in the Polish People's Republic, these matters get glossed over and replaced by social problems, along with those concerned with the limited position of women throughout the years.

As it turns out, the "imprisonment" of female directors within the genre of children's film, was a limitation only to an extent. Their work was safer and less reliant on the inclination of government censorship. The freedom they had to talk about numerous historical concerns, while at the same time being able to create compelling pictures for the demanding young audience, seemed unlimited – and despite that, in most cases wound up fitting within an existing pattern of sorts. Even though the films seemingly conveyed universal values comprehensible for audiences all around the world, still, somewhere in between the scenes one can detect the spirit and mentality of the era.

The list of the most-watched films in the Polish People's Republic at the beginning of this article, shows great demand for historical themes and adaptations based on children's literature. A combination of these two topics of the mentioned films might be considered as an excellent and well-thought out strategy. However, the popularity of these films and international success did not improve female directors' position in the Polish film industry. Moreover, during this time, the formula they chose to direct costume melodrama stories for young people has begun to lose its charm. Successive generations of young audiences were more attracted by the exotic, African adventures of Staś and Nel, space travels with Mister Blot or television series that become immensely popular which were produced mostly by men and mainly with boyish protagonists.

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Abstract

In this article the author focuses on the subgenre of historical film for children and adolescents directed in the Polish People’s Republic by female directors. In the 50s and 60s most of the Polish films dedicated for young audience were an adaptation of popular novels often based on historical events. As Piotr Kurpiewski points out: “the director’s intent behind those *historical* productions was strictly educational, and it aimed primarily for the young viewers to obtain some knowledge of history through watching the film.” But historical productions for children were not only captivating for the young audience, but also for the directors. Especially for female directors.

The main goal of this article is to present how that trivialized genre, of which examples were basically used as educational materials or treated as unserious fairytales, helped female directors speak in their own voices and give them opportunities to present past from their own perspectives.

Key words: Polish cinema; female directors; young audience; children’s literature; children’s film; adaptation; historical films