

Part 4: Theory and Small Cinemas

Krzysztof Loska

Instytut Sztuk Audiowizualnych, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Poland

13. Migrants and exiles in the films by Katarzyna Klimkiewicz

Abstract: A methodological starting point is transnationalism as understood by Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim who claim that the concept does not only refer to coproduction or global distribution but also includes political, cultural and social factors that help promote understanding contemporary cinema and the world around us. This is the perspective I would like to assume when analyzing the films by Katarzyna Klimkiewicz who mainly focuses on ethnic minorities and their problems. Klimkiewicz presents the lives of political and economic refugees, raising the issues of multicultural society, racism and discrimination. I concentrate on Klimkiewicz's short film entitled *Hanoi-Warszawa* (2009) and her feature debut *Flying Blind* (2012), made in Great Britain. On the basis of these two examples, I would like to prove that contemporary cinema tackles "a migrant issue" in different ways: one refers to the poetics of a documentary and allows the "subaltern Others" speak, while the other makes use of the genre conventions.

Keywords: Transnational cinema, immigrants, orientalism, Vietnamese diaspora in Poland

It seems that the concept of transnationalism has become ubiquitous in contemporary film studies. The issues of border crossings, flows, and cultural hybridity are frequently raised by scientists; however, it seems that Polish films are rarely analyzed in this context. Polish researchers still seem to find penchant in using the category of national cinema, which was already worked over a long time ago, thanks to the theoretical and empirical findings of Andrew Higson or Matte Hjort.¹ Nevertheless, a paradigm shift may be noticed with a recently published book *Polish Cinema in a Transnational Context*, in which the editors – Ewa Mazierska and Michael Goddard – convincingly justify the thesis that in recent years there has

1 See Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in: *Cinema and Nation*, eds. M. Hjort and S. MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 63–74. Mette Hjort, "On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism," in: *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, eds. Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen Newman (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 12–33.

been a turn consisting in “transition from analyzing textual aspects of a film to considering it as part of the production and reception system.”²

I do not intend to refer only to the two aforementioned dimensions of transnationalism. On the contrary, I would like to refer to the proposals made by Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, who stated that the concept of transnational does not only concern the issues of co-production and global distribution, but also takes into account political, cultural and social factors enabling a better understanding of today’s cinema and the world around us.³ This is the perspective one should assume when analyzing diasporic films, whose authors focus on the problems of ethnic minorities and illustrate the consequences of demographic change, talking about the lives of political and economic refugees, or consistently raising the issues such as life in a multicultural society, racism or discrimination.

In anthropological reflection on migratory movements that reveals their impact on the ongoing cultural transformation and the emergence of new transnational ties, one can often notice the references to media images. This is particularly clear in Arjun Appadurai’s concept, in which the functioning of culture is explained on the basis of the model that aims at revealing the interrelations of various *scapes*: ethnic, medial, technological, economic or ideological ones.⁴ The British anthropologist argues that there do not exist any clear barriers separating “us” from “them,” and that a national identity has lost its past character based on cohesion and unity of experience. In return, it has gained a new characteristic: a hybrid and cosmopolitan in nature. Contemporary world is viewed by Appadurai in terms of exchange and interpenetration of economic, political and cultural aspects.⁵

All these factors are crucial for understanding the idea of transnational cinema, and I am going to focus on them in my analysis of two films made by Katarzyna Klimkiewicz: a short film *Hanoi-Warszawa* (2009), which received the Special

2 Ewa Mazierska, Michael Goddard, “Introduction: Polish Cinema beyond Polish Borders,” in: *Polish Cinema in a Transnational Context*, eds. Ewa Mazierska and Michael Goddard (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014), pp. 3–4.

3 See Will Higbee, Song Hwee Lim, “Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies,” *Transnational Cinemas*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010), pp. 7–21.

4 See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 33–36.

5 One may find a similar approach in Edward W. Said’s texts, when he writes that “all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and monolithic.” See *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, Vintage Books, 1994), p. XXV.

Jury Award at the Gdynia Polish Film Festival for “inscribing Polish cinema in the broad emancipation processes,” and her feature debut *Flying Blind* (2012), made in Great Britain.⁶ By choosing these two films, I also wish to emphasize Klimkiewicz’s different approaches to the issue of immigration: the first one makes use of the poetics typical of a documentary, thanks to which it creates the impression of authenticity, whereas the second one follows the conventions of a melodrama, in which the themes of intercultural romance and forbidden love play a crucial role. The main difference between these approaches does not only lie in the aesthetic, but also in ideological choices, as it is connected with the construction of otherness and the adoption of a specific cognitive perspective. In *Hanoi-Warszawa*, the director lets the “subaltern speak” (to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s phrase),⁷ whereas in *Flying Blind*, she identifies with the point of view of a white Englishwoman. What is more, Klimkiewicz also employs orientalist strategies, whereby the representatives of ethnic minorities are exoticized and, at the same time, presented in a stereotypical way as potential criminals, terrorists or passionate lovers.⁸

The problem of illegal immigration and racial discrimination rarely appears in Polish cinema, while the intercultural exchange generally boils down to the encounters with “the others” that have been dwelling the Polish mind for centuries and has always meant the Jews or the Roma. One exception may be Marcin Wrona’s film *Moja krew* (*My Blood*, 2009), which tells the story of the Vietnamese diaspora, although it is presented from the point of view of a Polish boxer Igor (Eryk Lubos), who falls in love with an Asian girl. In the same year, Katarzyna Klimkiewicz made a documentary of a totally different character, free of any melodramatic elements. The film told the story of Mai Anh, a young Vietnamese woman, who illegally crossed the eastern border of Poland to reach Warsaw and find her boyfriend. The 30-minute film included a number of key themes typical

6 Having graduated from the Lodz Film School, Katarzyna Klimkiewicz (b. 1977) made a documentary *Labirynt Krystiana Lupy* (*The Labyrinth of Krystian Lupa*, 2003) presenting the work of the eminent Polish theatre director. Her later projects clearly followed a transnational model of production: she made a short film in Berlin *Wasserschlacht: The Great Border Battle* (2007) about the residents of two neighboring districts in Berlin: Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg, followed by a feature film made in Israel *Nic do stracenia* (*Nothing to Lose*, 2009) – a story of two young Jews who roam the country.

7 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in: *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 28–37.

8 I am using the term „orientalism“ in Edward W. Said’s understanding.

of European diasporic cinema, such as human trafficking, a sense of alienation, or complexity of relations between an ethnic majority and minority.⁹

From the beginning of the film, the director adopts the main character's perspective (Mai Anh), but at the same time keeps a distance, achieving this effect mainly due to the use of a foreign language throughout the film. The first sequence introduces the main themes: one of them concerns a group of Vietnamese people, working at the 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw and trading things on one of the largest bazaars in our part of Europe. The second theme focuses on a group of illegal immigrants who silently endure humiliation, while crossing the "green border." In this way, Klimkiewicz draws our attention to the dark side of mobility and migration, namely, human trafficking, which since the beginning of the new century has become a symbol of transnational nature of the criminal activity.¹⁰ Mai Anh (Thu Ha Mai) who gets sexually abused by her traffickers, manages to escape and, with the help of a young Polish couple whom she accidentally meets on her way (Klaudia Barcik and Przemysław Modliszewski), she somehow gets in touch with her fiancé and reaches Warsaw.

In her short film, Klimkiewicz captured one of the most important features defining the perception of minorities by a dominant majority. An illegal immigrant is not treated as a guest or a citizen, but as someone of a lower social status. Alessandro Dal Lago, an outstanding Italian sociologist, uses the term *non-person*, describing a man deprived of any rights, someone that can be arrested without

9 A notion of the diasporic cinema is an ambiguous category that refers both to the concept of an *accented cinema* suggested by Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and to Will Higbee's theory of transvergence, "Beyond the (Trans)national: Toward a Cinema of Transvergence in Postcolonial and Diasporic Francophone Cinema(s)," *Studies in French Cinema*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2007), pp. 79–91.

10 According to the UN definition: "Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs" (*Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000).

a reason, searched and deported.¹¹ Mai Anh is treated like an object, stripped of any dignity, and raped by a Polish driver (Michał Podsiadło) who smuggles people across the border. Her boyfriend, Thran (Le Thanh Hunh), is captured by the police together with a group of foreigners residing in the vicinity of the former 10th Anniversary Stadium. Both *Hanoi-Warszawa* and *Flying Blind* prove that an “illegal immigrant” does not only make a legal but also an anthropological category, because it denotes someone perceived as a threat. From such a point of view, it is the victim of persecution that should feel suspect and guilty.¹²

In one of the interviews, the director explained the reasons for her interest in the life of the Vietnamese diaspora in Poland: “I was wondering what it is like when someone becomes a “second-class” person. There was a time when the Poles who lived abroad were regarded as the “second-class” people. It turns out that in Poland, in our homeland, there are still foreigners who – due to our state policy – cannot feel free or live the way they want. For me it was a new experience – to be on the other side, because before it was me who was “the other”. Because of that I also experienced a bond of solidarity with those who feel this way in Poland.”¹³

Poles are generally portrayed in the media as a nation of immigrants, for decades leaving their homeland, first for political, then for economic reasons. Katarzyna Klimkiewicz and Marcin Wrona have turned their attention to a new phenomenon, associated with the influx of foreigners from different parts of the world, who dream of a better life or flee persecution, and settle down in Poland. Within the past few years, the number of applications for permanent residence card in Poland has increased by half, and the statistics show that the Vietnamese make the second largest national minority that settle in our country (Ukrainians being the most numerous one).¹⁴ Officially there live thirteen and a half thousand Vietnamese in Poland; however, according to the estimates that take into

11 See Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-Persons. The Exclusion of Migrants in a Global Society* (Milano: IPOC Press, 2009), pp. 231–232.

12 When writing about refugees and migrants, Giorgio Agamben claims that “the separation between humanitarianism and politics that we are experiencing today is the extreme phase of the separation of the rights of man from the rights of the citizen.” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 183.

13 Dàm Văn Anh, Katarzyna Klimkiewicz, “Do tej pory to ja byłam obca,” *Warszawa wielu kultur* (2010), 15 August 2017, <http://kontynent-warszawa.pl/content-6-felietony-5929-do-tej-pory-to-ja-by%C5%82am-obca.htm>.

14 According to the data of December 2013, 121,000 non-EU residents were the valid permanent residence cardholders in Poland. In the last five years, this figure has risen by 44,000. Most migrants come from the countries of the former Soviet Union, but a

account illegal immigration, there are three times as many altogether. The vast majority of them live in Masovian Voivodeship, mostly in suburban towns (in the municipalities of Raszyn and Lesznowola) and in the capital itself (in Wola and Ochota districts in the city center). Not many of them declare the intention to stay in Poland for good; usually they come only for a few years to earn reasonable money and then return to their families.¹⁵

In *Moja krew* and *Hanoi-Warszawa*, the audience have the rare opportunity to see the image of the Vietnamese diaspora in Poland.¹⁶ Both films emphasize cultural and traditional differences between the Polish majority and the Vietnamese minority, whose members prefer to live in a close-knit group. In contrast to Katarzyna Klimkiewicz, Marcin Wrona does not avoid the temptation of using a (pseudo-)ethnographic perspective and presents a snapshot of daily life of the Vietnamese, the scenes of their leisure activities, even their prayers in a Buddhist temple. The action of Wrona's film is set at around the same time as Klimkiewicz's documentary, that is, soon after the authorities' decision to close down one of the biggest open-air markets at the 10th Anniversary Stadium, which resulted in the majority of the Vietnamese moving to the shopping market in Wólka Kosowska. However, the bazaar remained the most characteristic feature of their world, consisting of a myriad of tin stalls, on which they sell clothes, a number of small bars serving Asian cuisine, and narrow alleys intersecting the area.¹⁷

Moja krew presents the image of an integrated community living its own life, while *Hanoi-Warszawa* focuses on a phenomenon, which is rarely discussed in the media, namely, human trafficking in which organized criminal groups are involved, and migrants' slave labor. Due to the difficulties in obtaining visas and a high cost of travel, illegal immigrants are often forced to work off the debt they earlier incurred. The newcomers of Mai Anh's kind have limited knowledge of

significant number (11%) includes the Vietnamese. See Konrad Pędziwiatr, "Imigranci w Polsce i wyzwania integracyjne," *Studia BAS*, No. 4 (40) (2014), pp. 137–138.

- 15 A history of the Vietnamese diaspora in Poland dates back to the late 1960s when a lot of young Vietnamese, who had fled from their war-stricken homeland, studied at Polish universities. The second wave of immigration came with political changes in Vietnam in the late 1980s.
- 16 In 2006, Anna Gajewska made a short documentary *Warszawiacy* (*Varsovians*), in which the Vietnamese tell about the reasons for which they had come to Poland and describe their life in exile.
- 17 A medium-length film *Making of 'Hanoi-Warszawa'* made by Marta Ambrosiewicz and Paweł Gliński for the Kino Polska TV channel brings a lot of interesting details on the work by Katarzyna Klimkiewicz.

Poland, they do not speak the language, and therefore, they are totally dependent on their employers who ruthlessly exploit them.¹⁸ Some immigrants are hiding from the police and use false names, as does the Mai's fiancé, hoping that in this way they will avoid deportation. In 2012, the Polish government announced the abolition program for foreigners residing in the country without a valid residence card, and nearly fifteen hundred Vietnamese profited from it.¹⁹

One of the sources of inspiration for *Hanoi-Warszawa* was Klimkiewicz's meeting with Ton Van Anh, a Vietnamese political activist, who has been living in Poland for twenty years and who organizes assistance for refugees. It was she who introduced Katarzyna Klimkiewicz into the Vietnamese diaspora, helping as a translator and intermediary in their contacts. She also told her stories of numerous Vietnamese people trying to get into our country. "Many of these stories were shocking, in the beginning I could not believe her, and I thought she was exaggerating. I had not realized before how difficult the experiences of the Vietnamese were. It was hard for me to believe that nobody speaks loudly about these things. I began to double-check the stories Ton Van Anh had told me, for example, I spoke with people working for the La Strada Foundation and the border guards in Przemyśl. It turned out that the dramatic experiences of Vietnamese trying to cross the border illegally were true. The story we tell in *Hanoi-Warszawa* could happen in reality. I tried to make it as credible and realistic as possible. All the situations depicted in the film could occur in reality."²⁰

The documentary has won many awards and honors, but it was the screening at the Short Film Festival in Bristol that made a turning point in Klimkiewicz's artistic career. Alison Sterling, an independent producer, working for Ignition Films company, was at the time preparing the production of a film *Flying Blind* based on the script written by Caroline Harrington and Naomi Wallace. A story of a romance between a middle-aged woman and a much younger Algerian immigrant seemed the good material for a feature debut for a Polish film director who had already shown interest in intercultural relations, although the poetics of

18 For human trafficking in contemporary cinema, see Krzysztof Loska, "Ciała na sprzedaż – mroczna strona globalizacji," *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, No. 83–84 (2013), pp. 306–316.

19 See Ignacy Józwiak, Anna Piłat, Justyna Segeš Frelak, Kinga Wysieńska and Mirosław Bieniecki, "Migracje społeczności z Azji i Bliskiego Wschodu na świecie i do Polski – stan badań i opracowanie na temat wybranych krajów," in: *Mała Azja w Polsce. Plany i strategie imigrantów z Azji i Bliskiego Wschodu* (Warsaw: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2013), p. 79.

20 Anh, Klimkiewicz, *Do tej pory to ja byłam obca*.

melodrama and thriller somehow limited the author's ability to voice her artistically original creativity.

I am not going to write about the way the genre conventions are employed in the film – it is not particularly original in this regard – but I would like to place *Flying Blind* in a broader political and cultural context. First, one should take into account the burden of orientalist thinking, which is responsible for creating a set of collective ideas about other cultures and people; second, one should bear in mind a certain “Islamophobia” of British society, which resulted from a fear of religious fundamentalism; third, one should not forget the political context of the “war on terror” led by Western countries after the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001.

The main character of the film is Frankie (Helen McCrory) who works in Bristol's aerospace industry and specializes in the construction of drones for the military. She also has a series of guest lectures for students of a technical university. Frankie is a strong and independent woman who efficiently supervises a team of other male professionals. She lives alone in a big house and devotes all the time to her career. From the beginning of the film, we can see that a matter of national security plays an important role both in her professional and personal life. To enter the guarded premises, she must use a special code, the tests she carries out on military devices are strictly confidential, and her projects are supervised by the intelligence services. Even her apartment resembles a fortress, the access to which is controlled by security cameras. The ethical issues relating to the nature of her research seem to be of lesser importance to her. When one of the students asks about her cooperation with the arms industry and scientists' indirect responsibility for the deaths of civilian victims of the bombings, Frankie replies that philosophical issues are not her concern: “Each plane can be used for military purposes. I am more interested in the beauty of a flight than in a plane's fighting ability.”

Her whole life changes when she meets a 24-year-old Algerian, Kahil (Najib Oudghiri), who claims to be an engineering student, but in fact is an illegal immigrant in the United Kingdom. He has fled his homeland because of political persecution (the police records show that he spent several months in prison, where he was tortured). Klimkiewicz does not develop the Algerian subplot, the viewers can only guess that Kahil may have participated in anti-government protests organized at the turn of 2010 and 2011 by the opposition parties, which resulted in three demonstrators getting killed, many others injured and arrested. After a few months of the protests, the authorities agreed to introduce the changes in the Constitution, announced the lifting of the martial law and accepted the demands for democratic elections.

The theme of an intercultural romance – typical of the diasporic cinema – is a ploy aimed to attract the cinema audiences who are usually uninterested in the problems of immigration or politics. This also explains why Klimkiewicz makes use of stereotypes concerning foreigners.²¹ Despite her critical ambitions, the plot seems to be heavy with stereotypical structures, especially in the first half of the film, when she introduces the theme of sexual infatuation and refers to the Orientalist fantasies about Arabs as potential lovers or criminals. Orientalism is not only a political tool, but also a system of knowledge, which serves to justify an imperialist vision of the world and to guarantee its control over the subjugated ones. On the one hand, Klimkiewicz confirms stereotypical opinions about the Orient as being full of contradictions – fascinating but torn with internal conflicts – on the other hand, however, she is trying to bring closer the two worlds through the characters' romance.

Nevertheless, the romantic love affair turns out to be less significant than the political background of the story, as the action of the film is set at the time of military conflicts in the Middle East, after the outbreak of Islamophobia accompanied by the process of radicalization among the Muslim community. These issues also appeared in other British films, such as *Yasmin* (2004) by Kenneth Glenaan or *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006) by Michael Winterbottom. It was the time when the Muslims were predominantly presented in the media as jihadists, members of the “fifth column,” and the opponents of democracy or civil rights. Jonathan Birth, who analyzed the phenomenon of Islamophobia, defines it as “a kind of cultural racism (...) producing community of the suffering ones, the aim of which is to unify various ethnic communities by giving them Muslim identity.”²²

For centuries, the Orient was presented as a potential threat to European governance; it was something foreign and unknown, which required taming and ordering. At the same time, the Orient was perceived as the source of fascinating ideas, exotic scenery for the romantic visions of poets and writers, and the symbol of carnal temptations and unrestricted manifestations of sexuality.²³ Katarzyna

21 A romance between the representatives of different ethnic groups is a popular theme in British cinema set in South-Asian diasporic communities: *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987, Stephen Frears), *My Son the Fanatic* (1997, Udayan Prasad), *East is East* (1999, Damien O'Donnell), *Ae Fond Kiss...* (2004, Ken Loach) and *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (2006, Pratibha Parmar).

22 Jonathan Birt, “Islamophobia in the Construction of British Muslim Identity Politics,” in: *Muslims in Britain. Race, Place and Identities*, eds. Peter Hopkins and Richard Gale (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 217.

23 See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

Klimkiewicz elaborates on these seemingly contradictory dimensions when focusing on the emotional relationship of the protagonists. Their uncertainty and fear of betrayal are accompanied by strong sensual infatuation. It should be noted that the Orientalist fantasies always contain an element of value judgment, emphasizing the traits undesirable in Western societies, such as irritability, succumbing to passions, violent behavior and betrayal.

As if following these assumptions, Klimkiewicz presents a deliberately ambiguous image of Kahil. The viewer will never discover the real motives of his actions, because everything we know about him is filtered through Frankie's eyes. In the beginning, she succumbs to the temptation of an exotic romance; after some time, however, she starts to take on some suspicion. She feels a strong urge to discover the truth about the young man: is he simply her lover, a political refugee or a terrorist? Several clues seem to confirm her concerns – her first meeting with Kahil may not have been accidental, she could have been chosen as a target because of her line of work. One day she bumps into Kahil's ex-girlfriend in the street and takes this opportunity to learn some disturbing facts about his past. Moreover, she finds the photos and articles on radical Muslim groups in his computer and discovers hidden guns in his apartment. Kahil does not deny having radical views, and blames her for the consequences of the barbaric bombings in which many civilians were killed: "Do you know what they are doing and who your drones kill?" Yet, at the same time, he claims to reject all military actions. "People like you think they know everything but in fact you know nothing", he tells Frankie in one of the last scenes, just before the deportation, when he finds out that the police and secret services have been tracking him down from the very beginning.

Like the previously mentioned films by Kenneth Glennan or Michael Winterbottom, *Flying Blind* shows the change that occurred in the cinema in the last twenty-five years, with the narrative of the Cold War being replaced with the fight against terrorism and the "clash of civilizations" as the main themes in new films. The term "war on terror," introduced by President George Bush in his speech after the attacks on the World Trade Center, "is often used to describe a special, historically conditioned form of political violence."²⁴ It should be noted that this term implies actions, both conventional and unconventional, that strengthen stereotypical ideas about Islamic fundamentalism, in spreading of which the mass media and the cinema play a prominent role.²⁵

24 Bruce Bennett, "Framing Terror: Cinema, Docudrama and the 'War on Terror,'" *Studies in Documentary Film*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2010), p. 210.

25 See Bennett, "Framing Terror," p. 222. On complex relations between the cinema and military technologies, see Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*

On the other hand, Samuel Huntington's vision of the world, based on the concept of a radical disparity of civilizations (rather than cultures), whose members profess different values and, therefore, remain in dispute, has found strong support among conservatives seeking a scientific justification for a unifying perception of reality.²⁶ In this way, the otherness is constructed by a chain of stereotypes, through which minority is seen as a potential threat and the source of all evil. According to Edward W. Said, this strategy of thinking is based on a "presumption of guilt on the part of a man of the Orient; what is more, his crime consists precisely in being the one."²⁷

The construction of a collective identity requires emotional involvement, not reasoning or clear thinking, and this is exactly what happens to Frankie: as if against her will, she lets herself be guided by her feelings, misinterpretations and prejudices. Behind a romantic story mixed with a thriller, one can notice a political drama that concerns the influx of contemporary immigrants in Western European countries and growing hostility against Muslims. When considering the modern Islamophobia, one should start by asking "to what extent the discrimination and exclusion experienced by Muslims in Europe is driven by religious or cultural, ethnic, racial and class-related factors."²⁸

When explaining the nature of modern aversion to Muslims, Monika Babako shows some similarities to anti-Semitism. "The target of the attacks are those considered to be irreducibly 'foreign' or those who threaten the purity of European/national identity, European/national social order, economic interests, political values and ways of life."²⁹ In any case, the enemy is defined by a series of mutually exclusive features: as someone weak and at the same time dangerous, someone poor and boasting unlimited financial resources, or someone both barbarous and refined. The conclusion derives from a specific intellectual strategy, which aims to demonstrate the epistemological and ontological differences between East and West.

Katarzyna Klimkiewicz reveals how Islamic terrorists become "orientalized," when they are associated with stereotypical notions of ruthless, irrational and cruel people of the East, contrasted with rational and democracy-loving citizens

(New York: Verso, 1989). In the establishing sequence of his *Four Lions* (2010), Chris Morris mocks the way terrorists use the media.

26 See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York and London: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

27 Said, *Orientalism*, p. 77.

28 Monika Babako, "Islamofobia – między „krytyką religii“ a rasizmem kulturowym," *Recykling Idei*, No. 14 (2012/2013), p. 15.

29 Babako, "Islamofobia," pp. 21–22.

of the West. To some extent, Klimkiewicz's film follows a scheme once described by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, according to which the phenomenon of terrorism in the modern cinema boils down to constructing a negative image of an immigrant as a potential threat, at the same time, presenting foreign cultures as "exotic" (this may be more clearly seen in the Hollywood productions where white Americans save the world from the evil "colored" ones who want to destroy it).³⁰

Homi K. Bhabha was one of the first researchers who drew attention to the fact that after the attacks on the World Trade Center, the modern forms of terrorism began to be viewed as a part of a broader phenomenon, namely, the aforementioned "clash of civilizations." The British anthropologist added, however, that such a reasoning contributes to the growth of aggression in political discourse, resulting in the birth of "psychosis leading to the persecution of the weak and the oppressed."³¹ The Clash of Civilizations implicitly justifies all sorts of actions taken by Western governments in order to eliminate the potential danger. But the opportunity to oppose the terrorist attacks may become possible only when "terrorism begins to be seen as an organized political action and not the result of cultural or civilizational difference."³²

In *Flying Blind*, Katarzyna Klimkiewicz managed to capture the impact of politics on the lives of ordinary people, and to draw attention to the consequences of unconscious assumptions being made about other cultures. The Polish director does not show any actual terrorist activities and evades clear explanations as to the nature of Kahil's motivations, leaving them for the viewers to guess. Instead of passing moral judgments or condemning anybody, she remains outside simply looking inside her characters' world. Her ability to inscribe the important political and social issues in the genre conventions prove to be one of the greatest values of both of her films, which touch the issues of illegal immigration, ethnic identity, intercultural conflict and the dangers brought on by the war on terror. Today these problems are considered both in local and global contexts, and therefore require taking a transnational perspective, which allows us to see the connections between seemingly distant areas.

30 Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, "General Introduction: What is Transnational Cinema?," in: *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 12. The final part of the book is titled *Tourists and Terrorists*.

31 Homi K. Bhabha, "Terror and After...," in: *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 197.

32 Bhabha, "Terror and After," p. 198.

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Agnieszka Kiejziewicz

Institut Sztuk Audiowizualnych, Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Poland

14. From controversy to contemplation: The thematic areas of the new Japanese avant- garde and experimental film in comparison to the “old masters” of Japanese avant-garde

Abstract: After the year 2000, the rapid development of the visual experimental and avant-garde art in Japan can be noticed. The new generation of the creators, who considers themselves as the founders of “the new avant-garde movement,” focuses on expanding the technological and thematic areas set by the independent artists from the 1970s and 1980s. Observing the unique works of the famous Collective Plus [+] and other recognizable filmmakers, the viewer can experience a wide range of themes, including the spiritual contemplation, ecological issues and problems with rapid urban development. However, among the works of the new generation of the avant-garde and experimental filmmakers, it is almost impossible to find the controversial subjects and controversies on the screen. Comparing the new experimental visual art to the topics and the ways of presentation used by the “old masters” of the Japanese avant-garde (such as Shuji Terayama, Takahiko Iimura or later Shinya Tsukamoto) it can be easily observed that the new generation avoids the subjects that might be considered to be controversial. Instead, they encourage the viewer to contemplate the beauty of the abstract, technologically advanced visions.

In this chapter, the author focuses on the comparison of the thematic areas of two generations of the Japanese independent artists, wondering why the new generation of the Japanese filmmakers avoids the controversial themes while stating that they follow the postulates of the old masters.

Keywords: Avant-garde, Japanese film, controversy, thematic areas, Takashi Makino, Kazuhiro Goshima, Shūji Terayama, experimental film, audiovisual experiment, Japan

Introduction

The avant-garde film on Japanese ground emerged from the successful combination of the aesthetics of the New Wave cinema (jap. *nūberu bāgu*), the body transgressions of the “pink films” (jap. *pinku eiga*)¹ and the eventful atmosphere of the 1960s. It was the time, when the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security

1 See: Jasper Sharp, *Behind the Pink Curtain. The Complete History of Japanese Sex Cinema* (Godalming: FAB Press, 2008).

between the United States and Japan, known as ANPO, was signed by Japanese government on May 20, 1960. The ratification of the treaty led to the protests, uniting students, artists, workers and other groups within Japanese society².

Writing about the first generation of the Japanese avant-garde artists, Isolde Standish mentions that: “A generational consciousness based on political opposition was intimately linked to the student movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Also, they shared experiences as Japan’s first generation of post-war filmmakers who were artistically stifled by a monopolistic and hierarchal commercial studio system [...]”³. According to this observation, the artistic pursuits of the first avant-garde directors can be perceived as opposed to commercialism and classical Japanese cinema. The new counter-cinema also addressed a different audience: politically conscious and interested in novelty offered by perception-challenging visual forms⁴. Also, the visual aesthetics of surrealism, mostly known from the Western pictures of Buñuel and Cocteau⁵, inspired the Japanese avant-garde movement. Among the Japanese authors, working in the 1960s and 1970s, who had a significant influence on the shape of the further audiovisual experiments, there should be mentioned Shūji Terayama and Jūrō Kara⁶. They mainly focused on the theme of body transgressions, searching for new ways of establishing contact with the viewers and encouraging them to reconsider the social and political reality.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, besides the continuous development of the avant-garde forms, the experimental branch of audiovisual forms appeared on the Japanese ground. The most prominent artists of that time, Toshio Matsumoto and Takahiko Imura, brought fresh insight into the world of a creative usage of the film techniques. At the other end of the scale should also be mentioned Ichiro Sueoka and Mako Idemitsu, female artists, who underlined the problems of the “second gender” in the Japanese society and undertook the polemics with the “male culture.” The middle and late 1980s brought to life an innovative hybrid of the newest technologies and avant-garde aesthetics – “technological avant-garde.”

2 Wesley M. Sasaki-Uemura, *Organizing the Spontaneous: Citizens Protest in Postwar Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), pp. 24–49.

3 Isolde Standish, *Politics, Porn and Protest. Japanese Avant-Garde Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s* (New York and London: Continuum, 2001), p. 1.

4 See: Standish, *Politics*, p. 1–10.

5 See: Mark Schilling, “Japanising the Dark Side: Surrealism in Japanese Film,” in: *The Unsilvered Screen: Surrealism on Film*, eds. Graeme Harper and Rob Stone (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), pp. 134–142.

6 Several studies and publications describe the films, performances and life of Shūji Terayama. See: Standish, *Sorgenfrei*.

The representatives of that current revolved around technophobia and through the futuristic visions of the cyber, metal bodies, strived to depict threats and hopes of the computer era.

Japanese avant-garde cyberpunk as a film genre emerged from the aesthetics of the New Wave transgressions, Japanese and Western Science Fiction and the experiments of the previous independent authors. Filmmakers such as Tsukamoto or Izumiya tried to show on the screen the alternative visions of the future, in which the fusion of technology and humans' curiosity will bring to life a new kind of monster – superhuman. Among the best known independent “cyberpunks,” Shinya Tsukamoto⁷, Sōgo Ishii⁸, Shōjin Fukui⁹ and Shigeru Izumiya¹⁰ should be mentioned. While the first one is widely known as the “father of the Japanese cyberpunk,” Sōgo Ishii is recognized as the author of films such as *Burst City* (*Bakuretsu toshi*, 1982) and *Crazy Thunder Road* (*Kuruizaki sandā rōdo*, 1980). He is also considered to be the precursor of the avant-garde cyberpunk genre on Japanese ground. What is more, mentioned above Shozin Fukui directed cyberpunk films such as *964 Pinocchio* (1991) and *Rubber's Lover* (1996). Another pre-cyberpunk director, Shigeru Izumiya, was the author of *Death Powder* (*Desu pawuda*, 1986), in which he presented the first android in Japanese cyberpunk-independent cinema. However, after the popularity boom of the multiplex cinemas in Japan in the 1990s¹¹, the interest in avant-garde and experimental forms of expression faded away, both among the artists and the publicists. Even though during that period Mako Idemitsu and Takahiko Iimura released some of their less-known works, the overall shape of the Japanese cinema was far from the experimental techniques and topics related to the interests of the avant-garde artists. In that case, the period between 1990 and 2000 can be perceived as a gap between old avant-garde forms and a new dynamic movement.

7 See: Tom Mes, *Iron Man. The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto* (Godalming: FAB Press, 2005). The author provides the complete analysis of Tsukamoto's early films and biographical facts that influenced his art.

8 See: Tom Mes and Jasper Sharp, *The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2005), pp. 67–69.

9 See: Mes, Sharp, *The Midnight Eye*, p. 226.

10 See: Graham Lewis, “Pinocchio 964, Death Powder and The Post – Human Condition,” in: *Japanese Horror Cinema*, ed. Jay McRoy, (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2005).

11 To observe the influence of the increasing number of multiplex cinemas on the number and popularity of imported, popular films, see: “Statistics of Film Industry in Japan,” *Motion Pictures Producers Association of Japan, Inc.*, 1 Jan. 2017, http://www.eiren.org/statistics_e/.

The rapid development of the visual experiment and avant-garde art in Japan after the year 2000 brings many questions on how are the objectives of the new movement, as well as how the young artists, relate their achievements to those presented by the previous generations. It should be underlined that the founders of “the new avant-garde movement” admit to being inspired by the works of other independent artists, but, at the same time, they try to expand the technological and thematic areas set by the golden age of Japanese avant-garde. In this chapter, I will focus on the thematic areas of the new movement to show the variety of themes they cover. Analyzing the works of a highly active group Collective Plus [+]¹², an independent group of young filmmakers set up by Takashi Makino, Rei Hayama and Shinkan Tamaki and other recognizable filmmakers, such as Kazuhiro Goshima¹³ and Tomonari Nishikawa¹⁴, I would like to consider the problem of discarding the controversial themes for the spiritual explorations.

It can be observed that the new generation of avant-garde and experimental filmmakers avoids the controversial subjects and even the metaphorical representations of the controversies on the screen. Comparing their visual art to the themes and the ways of presentation used by the “masters” of the Japanese avant-garde, it can be pointed out that the new generation avoids the body transgressions and the subjects that might be classified as controversial, improper or politically incorrect. Instead of trying to shock the viewer, young artists focus on the problems of urbanization, pay considerable attention to coexistence with nature, as well as to the threats and drawbacks of implementing new technologies into the everyday life. The new avant-garde filmmakers also strive to develop their understanding of the newest technological tools that allows them to express the figments of their imaginations adequately on the screen¹⁵. Here, the problem of the medium and artistic pursuits also becomes the issue presented in the films.

12 More about the group can be found in their publication: *Plus Documents 2009–2013*, ed. Takashi Makino (Indianapolis: Engine Books, 2014).

13 More about Kazuhiro Goshima (including the list of his films) can be found on his website: Kazuhiro Goshima, *Kazuhiro Goshima*, (2013): 17 Jan. 2017, <http://www.goshiman.com/>.

14 The examples of Tomonari Nishikawa’s works can be found on his website: Tomonari Nishikawa, *Tomonari Nishikawa*, (2017): 10 Jan. 2017, <http://www.tomonarinishikawa.com/>.

15 Agnieszka Kiejziewicz, “The technologies of experimental Japanese filmmakers in the digital era,” *Transmissions: The Journal of Film and Media Studies*, Vol.1, No. 1 (2016), pp. 99–114.

Considering the fact that the young artists at the same time focus on being politically correct and state that they follow (and even improve) the postulates of the “old masters”¹⁶, intangibly related to the controversial topics, I will compare the chosen thematic areas with the reasons for the paradigm shift among the young artists. Providing the examples of the films from different cinematic epochs, I will show that the new Japanese avant-garde follows only the visual aesthetics and techniques introduced by the “old masters,” leaving behind their postulates.

New generation, new objectives

The artists working under the label of the new Japanese avant-garde are mostly the graduates of audiovisual studies, who not only pursue their dreams of the new audiovisual experience but also hold a formal education in their fields¹⁷. They continuously extend their knowledge of the available technologies, what became the identification point of the new generation of the filmmakers. In their postulates, the young filmmakers state that it is important to offer the viewer the best possible quality of the experience. The significant feature of the mentioned Japanese artists is their presence on the Internet and the attention they pay to maintain the close contact with fans. The filmmakers not only post about their newest achievements on their websites and social media profiles, allowing the viewers to comment on their art, but also care to be present at screenings and visit festivals. Thanks to the contact with fans they can respond quickly to the feedback and expectations, which means that their art is constantly a matter of alterations and changes. The young experimenters postulate that improving the form and searching for the perfect image of their projects is one of the most important goals of their generation. What is more, the Internet is eagerly being used by the artists to successfully promote their works to reach the potential donors. It is worth mentioning that the new generation of artists communicates with their fans through the Internet; for example, Takashi Makino and Shinkan Tamaki have their Facebook profiles open for commentaries.

It is not easy to bring together all the postulates of the new generation of avant-garde Japanese artists, as they did not openly publish their manifestos. Unlike

16 See: Takashi Makino, Rei Hayama, Shinkan Tamaki, “Mostra de Cinema Periferico,” *Youtube*, (6 Jun. 2014): 17 Dec. 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-UWJRVu77c>.

17 For example, Kazuhiro Goshima graduated from Kyoto Institute of Technology.

Shūji Terayama¹⁸, who in 1975 published his collected objectives or Iimura¹⁹, the young artists prefer to reveal their point of view little by little, publishing important thoughts on the websites or mentioning them during the interviews. However, one exception can be a booklet released by Collective Plus [+], in which the artists featured brief descriptions of their recent works, the interviews, impressions and commentaries²⁰. Nevertheless, the representatives of the Collective Plus [+] stated their aims during the 5th edition of the festival *Mostra de Cinema Periférico* in Spain²¹. They called themselves a “new avant-garde,” considering their pictures as a continuation of the achievements of previous generations of Japanese experimental artists. They also mentioned that besides offering new experiences to the viewers, they want to show how the new technologies can be incorporated into the world of art. According to this, the artists hope for extending the widespread knowledge of the cinema-related technologies, which can be beneficial to the viewers in terms of film education. They declare that the main point of their activity is to rescue the Japanese cinema from “the mediocre plots of the popular movies.” On the Collective’s blog (part of Makino’s website), the artists state that: “The main aim of + is to vitalize the art of the essential cinema, made regardless of any existing boundaries, in contrast to blockbusters. [...] + is no longer just a screening project. This is a movement by several different individuals such as filmmakers, musicians, artists and critics. This is a flexible community of those who resonant each other in the moment”²².

Analyzing the presented statements, it can be observed that the young generation perceives the role of the avant-garde movement through its educative purposes. The quality of the screening they want to offer should, according to them, fill out the gap between popular cinema and the need for a meaningful audiovisual experience. Following the working style of famous avant-garde directors, such as Terayama²³, some representatives of the new generation postulate that forming the groups and collectives is inevitable to obtain a free flow of ideas. Among the postulates and goals the young artists wish to carry out, there should be mentioned the idea of presenting an entirely different face of Japanese cinema abroad.

18 Terayama presented his postulates in the manifesto, see: Shuji Terayama, “Manifesto,” *The Drama Review*, Vol.19, No. 4 (1975), pp. 84–85.

19 Iimura described his main objectives in his publication, see: Takahiko Iimura, *The Collected Writings of Takahiko Iimura* (Maryland: Wildside Press LLC, 2007).

20 See: *Plus Documents*, 2014.

21 Takashi Makino, Rei Hayama, Shinkan Tamaki, “*Mostra de Cinema Periferico*.”

22 Takashi Makino, *Makino Takashi*, (2015): 15 Dec. 2016, <http://makinotakashi.net/>.

23 To read more about Terayama’s working style, see: Standish or Sorgenfrei.

The artists want to break the stereotypical view of Japanese cinema through the prism of *jidai geki*²⁴ and *kaijū*²⁵ films and bring attention to the unknown aesthetic currents. It should be underlined that every experimental artist also has his own postulates, mainly connected to the leading theme of his or her works. However, the mentioned goals, such as the promotion of art, creating the new quality of cinema and personal development, also reappear in the statements of the young artists.

Comparing the aims of the new experimental artists to the activities performed by the “old masters,” it can be perceived that the actions designed to shock the society and create controversy during the 1960s and later evolved into promotional mechanisms and strategies. For example, the meaning of the artistic collective has changed. The groups of the first Japanese avant-garde artists occupied the city space camping in huge, colorful tents in parks and invaded the streets in noisy processions²⁶, trying to manifest their independence, distinctiveness and unity inside the collective. Nowadays, the young artists do not undertake such visible actions, limiting their appearance to screenings held by galleries, local cinemas and universities, therefore being invisible for the wider audience. Also, the contact with fans, obtained through the Internet and personal meetings, lacks the wild mood introduced by Terayama, who could even harass the viewer during the performance to make him “feel” the art²⁷.

Controversial themes of the “old masters”

The Japanese avant-garde movement, concentrated on the antiestablishment manifestations, did not avoid highly controversial issues. The primary purpose of the artists working then was to shock the viewers, to make them reconsider the reality, cultural norms, the history and the political issues of that time.

Often the avant-garde artists created a caricature, grotesque and unreal picture of the Japanese society to underline the current problems that needed reconsideration. For example, the anti-utopian, terrifying and cruel world was presented

24 *Jidai geki* is a Japanese film and TV series genre of historical dramas, mostly set in Edo period (1603–1868) of Japanese history.

25 *Kaijū eiga* is a film (TV, books, manga and games) genre characterized by the appearance of the variety of monsters (for example *Godzilla* by Ishiro Honda).

26 To read more about Terayama’s performance, see Stanca Scholz-Cionca, *Japanese Theatre and the International Stage* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001), pp. 255–258.

27 Stanca Scholz-Cionca, *Japanese Theatre*.

in Terayama's film *Emperor Tomato Ketchup* (*Tomato Kecchappu Kōtei*, 1971)²⁸. Here, the director depicts the state ruled by the rebellious children, who hunt for the adults to imprison or even eliminate them²⁹. The deepest controversy of the film lay in the presentation of the children's sexual intercourses with the enslaved adults, and that is why the picture was the object of Japanese and Western censorship³⁰. However, explicit violence and atrocities are used by Terayama as the symbols of the dawn of the societal order in postwar Japan.

The critique of the changes in the Japanese society in the works of the avant-garde artists often appeared together with body transgressions. Here can be mentioned the films that show the metamorphosis of the body, stepping out the limits of the flesh (strength, power, abilities, adaptation) and that covers the topic of transgression from one form of the corporal state to another. Shinya Tsukamoto presented the horrifying fusion of the flesh and metal that resulted in creating the superior human being in his *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989)³¹. The controversial transgression, obscure and shocking, can also be found in the films of other "cyberpunks," as mentioned, before Shōjin Fukui or Shigeru Izumiya. Moreover, the body, as well as sexuality themes, appeared in experimental, short productions. Here, the particular attention should be devoted to *Love (Ai)*, 1962 by Takahiko Iimura. His incredibly sensual and intimate picture presents, in a huge close-up, the sexual intercourse of an undefined couple. The bodies appear on the screen as white smudges, intersected by the black shadows of the body contours, making it almost impossible to recognize the limbs at the first glimpse. Iimura's picture brings to mind the film of an American artist Barbara Hammer, who also presented the love act in the same aesthetics in her *Dykatactics* (1974)³². The theme of sexuality also came back as the narrations about the sexual minorities, such as in a famous *Funeral Parade of Roses* (*Bara no sōretsu*, 1969) by Toshio Matsumoto³³.

Another important and controversial theme, regarding the traditional gender roles in Japanese society, was the case of femininity and social control. Except

28 Frank Jacob, "Emperor Tomato Ketchup: The Child as the Dictator of Mankind," in: *The Child in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema*, ed. by Debbie Olson (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), p. 161.

29 See: Frank, "Emperor Tomato Ketchup," p. 161.

30 After the reaction of the censorship bureau, Terayama's film was shortened from the 85 minutes of the original material to 28 minutes' version screened in Europe.

31 Mes, *Iron Man*, pp. 49–67.

32 *Dykatactic*. Barbara Hammer, USA, 1974.

33 Michael Raine, "Introduction to Matsumoto Toshio: A Theory of Avant-Garde Documentary," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (2012), pp. 144–147.

Yoko Ono³⁴, widely recognized among the Western audience, it is also worth mentioning Mako Idemitsu³⁵. In her works, Idemitsu focused on the meaning of the role of a mother in Japan (ex. series *Great Mother*, 1983–1984), the situation of the housebound housewives (ex. *Kiyoko's Situation*, 1989) and, what she calls, “social control” over the women’s and girl’s minds by providing them with constant examples of the ideal behavior, accepted by the society (*Inner Man*, 1972).

The artists of the first generation of the Japanese avant-garde did not restrain themselves only to the categories presented above. However, the controversy, critique of the norms, attempts to cross the boundaries of the traditional aesthetics were the important parts of their pictures, as well as the main points of their artistic programs. It can be summarized that the controversy defined the existence of the Japanese avant-garde, as the movement emerged on the wave of the critique of social norms.

Thematic areas of the new avant-garde filmmakers

The thematic areas of the new avant-garde filmmakers can be divided into two categories. The first one contains the works of the directors who are mainly interested in developing their technological skills to be able to create more advanced and visually astounding contemplation films. Their projects often revolve around abstract, quickly changing frames and surreal aesthetics, not introducing the theme directly. The visual art they present is often metaphysical and symbolic, covering topics such as the meaning of existence and human’s place in the cosmic order.

One of the most notable artists, concentrated on the abstract ideas, is Takashi Makino³⁶, the founder and member of the Collective Plus [+]. Combining 3D techniques with the original usage of the Pulfrich effect³⁷, he shows the visions of cosmos, generated by computer processing of the images. Among Makino’s films depicting the whirling supernovas, the most popular (and most often screened)

34 More about the works and life of Yoko Ono can be found in the publication: Hans U. Obrist, *Yoko Ono* (New York: Distributed Art Pub Incorporated, 2009).

35 The complete list of Idemitsu’s films, together with short descriptions, can be found on artist’s website: Mako Idemitsu, *Mako Idemitsu – Media Artist*, (2016): 15 Jan 2017, <http://makoidemitsu.com/work-archive/?lang=en>.

36 See: Takashi Makino, *Makino Takashi*.

37 Takashi Makino described how he used the Pulfrich effect in his film in the interview for Los Angeles Film Forum. See: “Takashi Makino: Entering a Noisy Cosmos”, *Los Angeles Film Forum*: 30 Mar. 2016, <http://www.lafilmforum.org/archive/fall-2014-schedule/makino-takashi-entering-a-noisy-cosmos/>.

are *Phantom Nebula* (2014) and *Still in Cosmos* (2009). The illusion of depth he creates, based on the difference in timing of the signal, is recognized by the eyes of the audience³⁸. As the artist states, he wants to encourage the viewers to open up for new experiences and search for an absolute through the contemplation of the abstract images³⁹. To his account, Makino also has a film that resembles a visual diary. In *2012* (2013) Makino shows what he observed and felt during the year 2012, after the Fukushima disaster. As he indicated in the interview conducted by Julian Ross, in the film *2012* the artist wanted to show the atmosphere of the year, during which the fear of the radioactivity after the Fukushima disaster dominated the media discourse in Japan⁴⁰. However, *2012* does not present the critique of the government or even the catastrophe as a political issue. The author concentrates on the mood and national grief, avoiding the controversy or direct comments on the situation. Makino felt that by preparing the film related to the catastrophe, he will have an opportunity to capture the spirit of the nation at that time⁴¹. Another artist, who focuses on showing abstract pictures of familiar, everyday objects and people, is Shinkan Tamaki⁴². The director uses the symbolism to undertake a game with the viewer's perception, what can be observed in his films *Dying Moon* (2005) or *One Record on December* (2007). However, the contemplation of the shapes and textures, unrecognizable for the first glimpse, does not offer the space for controversy, transgression or political critique.

The second thematic area appearing in the works of the new Japanese avant-garde and experimental artists is the role of nature in humans' lives and the peaceful coexistence of all living creatures. The directors also raise the issue of the people alienated in a modern metropolis, unable to find their way back to the joyful land of ecological utopia from the pre-industrial times. In this case, nature becomes the metaphor of the freedom, lost by the inhabitant of the sterile cities. The importance of the contact with nature became the primary interest of Rei Hayama⁴³, also the member of Collective Plus [+]. Her films became the reflections of what is significant for the author, as she spent her childhood living with

38 See: Kiejziewicz, "The technologies," p. 105.

39 "Takashi Makino: Entering a Noisy Cosmos."

40 Julian Ross, "Interview: Takashi Makino," *Filmcomment*, Vol. 3, (Oct 2014): 15 Jan. 2016, <http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-takashi-makino/>.

41 Ross.

42 See: Shinkan Tamaki, *shinkantamaki.net*, (2017): 18 Jan. 2017, <http://shinkantamaki.net/about/>.

43 Rei Hayama, *Rei Hayama*, 19 Jan. 2017, <http://www.reihayama.net/>.

her parents in the forest hut⁴⁴. Hayama recreates on the screen the memories of the innocent children's plays in the natural environment, which can be observed, for example, in *A Child Goes Burying Dead Insects* (2009). She also focuses on the beauty of nature itself and compares the industrial environment with the evergreen settings (ex. *Emblem*, 2012).

The problem of being lost in an urban environment again appears in the works of Kazuhiro Goshima⁴⁵ and Tomonari Nishikawa⁴⁶, who emphasize the overwhelming atmosphere of the detail-planned spaces of the metropolis. They also portray artificial environment as an organism powered by the infinite, mysterious energy. The cities in Goshima's and Nishikawa's films are accelerated by the shadows or the movements of the inhabitants. The uncanny atmosphere of the modern cities is connected to the discourse about the catastrophe of the humanity, caused by the excessive usage of the atomic power and rapid technological development. Goshima's empty and silent urban spaces bring to mind, deprived of the inhabitants, postapocalyptic areas (such as in *Different Cities*, 2006). The problem of nuclear power also appears in Tomonari Nishikawa's picture *Sound of a Million Insects, Light of a Thousand Stars* (2014). In this film, the author openly criticizes the Japanese government for stating that the terrain around the reactors was completely safe and encouraging the former inhabitants to come back to their premises. The controversy of Nishikawa's picture lies in the technology he adopted – the artist buried the film tape under the fallen leaves on the previously contaminated area and left it there for the nighttime. Later on, the author retrieved it with the help of the American technicians and processed (the contaminated) tape in the studio, showing the effects that the radioactive waste in the soil had on the material. Nishikawa describes the process of preparing *Sound...* on his website: "I buried a 100-foot 35mm film negative film under fallen leaves alongside a country road, which was about 15 miles away from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, for one night in June 2014. The film was exposed to the possible remaining of the radioactive materials"⁴⁷.

As it can be observed on the presented examples of the best known new Japanese avant-garde films, it is hard to find many controversial themes among the works of the young generation of the artists. They mostly focus on the spiritual

44 Monica Delgado, Jose S. Hinojosa, "Interview: Rei Hayama," *Desistfilm* (8 Jul 2014): 11 Sept. 2016. <http://desistfilm.com/interview-rei-hayama/>.

45 See: Kazuhiro Goshima, *Kazuhiro Goshima*.

46 See: Tomonari Nishikawa, *Tomonari Nishikawa*.

47 Tomonari Nishikawa, *Tomonari Nishikawa*.

and contemplative mood, not forcing the viewer to change his perception, but gently encouraging him to reconsider the chosen problem. Moreover, the directors seem to be more interested in focusing on global issues and universal themes as urbanization, the opposition of nature versus industrialization and personal development. They also completely abandoned the discourse of the body transgressions, which was the most controversial theme of the first Japanese avant-garde film.

Conclusion: Who needs controversy today?

As Polish researcher Krystyna Wilkoszewska observes, the avant-garde can be perceived both as an anarchist movement aiming at overthrowing the existing artistic standards and as the formal experiment – the act of inventing new aesthetics⁴⁸, different from the traditional art. According to the presented statement, it can be admitted that the new generation continues the postulates of the first Japanese avant-garde movement only if the new movement is perceived as the form of new aesthetics. However, taking into consideration all postulates of two generations of the filmmakers and comparing the most popular themes adopted by them, it has to be admitted that the young artists do not fully follow the path introduced by the “old masters.”

Besides the noticeable rejection of the controversial themes by the new avant-garde, there are significant differences in understanding the contact with the audience. Also, the ways of distribution of the ideas and ready products (recordings, posters, results) has changed, resembling the strategies of the mainstream cinema. Moreover, it can also be noted that working inside the collectives differentiates from the practices of the “old masters.” Nowadays, the groups focus on a collaborative collection of funds and focus mostly on economic aspects of this cooperation. However, as Takashi Makino admits, sharing ideas also plays a major role in the collective work.

Summing up, the young generation of the Japanese avant-garde directors continues the postulates of the “old masters” only on the ground of the aesthetic experiments with the “form.” The controversy that played an important part in the art of the previous generation is no longer needed in the new independent, experimental films, as the objectives and themes have changed. The meditation and slow, thorough contemplation of the social problems became the most important and recurring theme of the new avant-garde. Instead of trying to alter

48 *Wiek awangardy* [The Age of Avant-Garde], ed. Liliana Bieszczad (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), p. 9.

the viewer's point of view by shocking him, the artists offer the audience some relief, a peaceful rest from everyday noise and mainstream films that focus on the attraction, shock and transgressions.

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Janina Falkowska

*Western Arts and Humanities, Canada, and University
of Economics and Humanities in Bielsko-Biala, Poland*

15. Mockumentary cinema and its political might: Self-reflexivity and carnivalesque in the films of Michael Moore and Sacha Baron Cohen

Abstract: The topic of this chapter is “mockumentary” cinema. Called by Timothy Corrigan “essay films,” such documents “interpolate a subjective and investigative agency within the footage of media events from a variety of angles.” Michael Moore and Sacha Baron Cohen make their films in the manner of mocku-documentary, each of them using their investigating personae to remake the news across “their own image and agency.” Eventually, they create politically powerful boisterous carnivalesque films far exceeding the effect of a mere presentation of fact. I am especially interested in the ways these films cross genre boundaries and emerge as a separate small cinema with its own choice of means, among which the narrator seems to play the most effective part in producing a powerful emotional response to this kind of film.

Keywords: Mockumentary, carnivalesque, Michael Moore, Sacha Baron Cohen, essay film

Small cinema is usually described as cinema of small nations or produced in small countries. However, we have observed cinemas defined by particular characteristics or formats emerging in one country or one geographical location and then spreading over continents, imitated and emulated by others elsewhere. French New Wave and the Dogma Movement are obvious such examples in fiction cinemas, while in documentary cinema, it is mockumentary and self-reflexive cinema that merit similar attention.

In this chapter, I will concentrate on documentary cinema and its specific variety: mock-documentary film. Being a variation of documentary film, on the one hand, it embodies the genre’s uniqueness in content and form but, on the other hand, it symbolizes the enigmatic nature of any other genre categories.

In essence, documentary is a nonfiction film that reenacts, comments on, or generally retells history. It is entirely factual, even though it may also state opinions about the facts it presents. Conversely, mock-documentary underscores the genre’s origins in copying a preexisting form in an effort to construct a film form that the audience is assumed to be familiar with. A mock-documentary subverts

or ridicules by imitation, applies critical distance, and incorporates documentary for entertainment's sake. However, a mock-documentary can also exert political criticism through sheer power of images and the antics of the commentator or narrator presented in it.

My attention to this type of documentary grew from a number of research interests I have harbored over the years: interest in categorization, film genres, and subversion of the aforementioned through disruptive practices of mockery and self-reflexive distance. Whenever a carefully designed category or rule organized the principles of genre in neatly defined boundaries, sheer imagination of the director, the outrageousness of major protagonists or narrators in the films uprooted the categories and created a highly welcome chaos in the vein of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque.

How to then treat these kinds of documentaries in which the personae of the commentators take over and go beyond just reporting on the true events? It is the persona that dominates the message, and not the events themselves. In this sense, such films could be treated as particularly obnoxious essay films in which the intrusive selves of the directors overpower the truth value of the presented events. In his book *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, Timothy Corrigan introduces a definition for the essay film as one revealing the following characteristics, among others: "If both verbal and visual expression can commonly suggest the articulation or projection of an interior self into an exterior world, essayistic expressivity describes (...) a subjection of that instrumental or expressive self to a public domain, often personified as a shifting and disembodied 'you.'"¹

In her article, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," Laura Rascaroli notes several other factors that appropriate a film to be an essay film. After thorough research of many authors writing on the subject, she identifies the following aspects revealed by an essay film:

- disrespect for traditional boundaries
- self-reflectivity and self-reflexivity
- subjectivity and its foregrounding
- incorporation of the act of reasoning in the film
- transgressivity, digressivity, playfulness, contradictory and political nature
- a mode of personal reflection
- self-conscious style
- presence of words, in the form of a text, either spoken, subtitled or intertitled

1 Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 33.

- strong presence of the enunciator in the “expository” mode, “in which we find a ‘voice of God’ commentary directed toward the viewer”²

Michael Moore and Sacha Baron Cohen have made such films and have performed in them, respectively. Their films exceed expectations and are a source of constant delight but also introduce serious critique. One of the techniques that they effectively apply is the use of their own investigative personae to remake the data according to their own image and agency.

In the case of Michael Moore, it is his persona that generates resistance, spite (as expressed by many authors of critical articles about him), and adds to the explosive content of the film, which probably would not have been as fiercely debated and perceived as quasi-truthful if it were presented as more toned down in content and unmediated by an ill-tempered journalist. For instance, the presentation of events in *Roger & Me* (1989), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Sicko* (2007), and *Where to Invade Next* (2015) was generally described as manipulative and not to be trusted.

Most authors refer to Moore’s narrative persona as, either by appearing in the films or by narrating them off-screen, enriching the films’ content with a particular mixture of pathos, pugnacity, and spite. His pseudo-documentaries become mockumentaries because they mimic the genre and turn it “upside down” to expose its authoritarian nature and questionable “truth value.”

Corrigan states that Moore reaches the pinnacle of notoriety precisely because his subjective self gains the upper hand in the message he transmits. “Despite his often outlandish and cartoonish posturing – or, more accurately, because of those poses – Moore and his films effectively mimic and ironize the strategies of conventional news reportage as efforts, I would argue, to return the ideological risks of subjective thinking to the streets of public events.”³

Instead of realizing Moore’s films potential for more insightful analysis of their ideological, historical, and social content, the authors of many publications written on “the case of Michael Moore” remain palpably offended by the content and Moore’s unsubstantiated spite and accusations and react emphatically to the films.

The excerpts from the articles, written by Tony McKibbin, Christopher Hitchens, and Louise Spence, respectively, clearly illustrate the kind of affective reaction Moore elicits, resulting in an obvious discomfort that viewers experience when they watch Michael Moore’s films. For instance, on Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Tony McKibbin states,

2 Laura Rascaroli, “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments,” *Framework*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Fall 2008), pp. 24–38.

3 Corrigan, *Essay Film*, p. 173.

Moore's documentary is not a film of political thought (à la Errol Morris' recent *The Fog of War* [2003]), but a film of insistent righteousness. B. Ruby Rich is absolutely right when she says in her *Sight and Sound* piece that "experience is more valued than evidence; appeals to emotion tend to succeed over the most perfectly crafted argument."⁴

Moore is so hysterically insistent that he leaves skeptics feeling naive. On the one hand, you come away from the film believing any attempt at democracy in America is a waste of time and energy, and on the other, that George Bush's incompetence is completely responsible for a decline of the American empire.⁵ When Hitchens and others say that Moore wants it all ways, we merely have to suggest that he wants to mix genres in such a manner that he can offer some very intriguing footage, and seeks to win an argument that is never really logically expressed.⁶

Not surprisingly, the lack of logic and the presence of emotion in Moore's direct address to the audiences has been politically effective as it brought about an incredible debate in the Senate. Robert Brent Toplin reports,

Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer, evidently affected by the emotion-laden footage at the beginning of *Fahrenheit 9/11* showing that no senator had been willing to support a challenge to the 2000 presidential election results, agreed to back such a challenge in 2005. This action, dubbed Boxer's Rebellion, drew Senators into nearly four hours of contentious debate. The nightly television programs of January 7 brought lively commentary on the matter and the politics of Michael Moore.⁷

An especially insightful article about Michael Moore's films has been written by Louise Spence⁸ who focuses on Moore's persona and the way it influences his films' reception. She specifically focuses on the following matters:

1. The role of authority and intellectual skills
2. Moore's reinforcement and reiteration of himself and only himself
3. Rejection of documentary skills – he is scruffy, tough, slouchy

4 Tony McKibbin, *The Thickening Centre: Fahrenheit 9/11, Senses of Cinema*, No. 33 (October 2004), accessed 10 June 2016, <http://sensesofcinema.com/?s=The+Thickening+Centre>.

5 McKibbin, *The Thickening Centre*.

6 Christopher Hitchens, "Unfairness 9–11: The Lies of Michael Moore," *Slate* (21 June 2004), accessed 16 September 2004, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2004/06/unfairness_911.html.

7 Robert Brent Toplin, "The Long Battle Over Fahrenheit 9/11: A Matter of Politics, Not Aesthetics," *Film and History*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2005), p. 8.

8 Louise Spence (with Vinicius Navarro), "Working-Class Hero: Michael Moore's Authorial Voice and Persona," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2010), pp. 368–380.

4. Romanticism and nostalgia
5. Persona as evidence

Louise Spence is especially critical of Moore in the entire article, not changing her approach even upon reflection of the possibility that the Moore persona functions as a character in a romantic comedy in which the rhetoric of comedy moves toward a happy ending. In a pugnacious comedy, every move and trick serves as a proper act in the comedy including a carnivalesque intolerable behavior of the protagonist.

This article looks at Michael Moore's persona – the aggrieved, aggressive maverick, the know-it-all who knows nothing – to explore the idea of authorial voice and persona in nonfiction filmmaking. Michael Moore, the everyman, the ordinary guy in the gray-stained tee shirt whose job it is to look after our interests, seems to be the authority that is no better than we are, but who has more guts. Smart, but appearing to be unschooled, his belligerent air of thwarted entitlement and his anti-intellectualism point to a contradictory set of values and viewpoints, paternalistic authority on the one hand and rugged delinquency on the other, that are sometimes hard to splice together.(...)⁹

His rejection of the documentary label seems to be tied to his rejection of, and disrespect for, the dry authority of documentaries. Yet his persona feeds off the glow of the authority it condemns. Moore has a self-mocking tenor to his persona – setting up a double edged humor. He may be eccentric and weird, but never as eccentric or weird as the others he encounters. He gets a lot of laughs out of nursing his distrust of people in authority and with power, “stupid white men.”¹⁰

Almost all the authors of publications about Moore reject his persona as a legitimate author of a documentary film but rather present him as someone who is vulgar, furious, and not a good material for any presentation or performing skills.

In my opinion, however, what Michael Moore really does is work as a subversive clown who wants to challenge the system in place to persuade people to contemplate reality. In this sense, he fits into the idea of carnivalesque, a Bakhtinian idea of the temporary destruction of order in place during a carnival.

Consequently, Michael Moore as the documentary filmmaker is a king of fools or a holy fool so loved by figures of authority (like kings or princes) who could see in him a twisted rendering of their own personae. The members of the audience also recognized this. They understood the climate of constant rebellion in documenting reality, whereby the presented truth becomes the subject of the carnivalesque itself that defines the political life today.

9 Spence, “Working-Class Hero,” p. 368.

10 Spence, “Working-Class Hero,” p. 371.

Disrespect for the figures of authority, disregard for the lawful processes, the blending of the public and the private expressed in social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter by public and private figures alike, all these opinions treated as equally important, truthful, and wise have led to the outrageous carnivalization of society in which disorder rules, everybody and everything are questioned in both hilarious and demagogic ways.

This kind of carnivalization is also present in a well-known film directed by Larry Charles with Sacha Baron Cohen, a renowned British comedian. The film is a mockumentary following the misadventures of Borat, a Kazakh journalist who “leaves his native Kazakhstan to travel to America to make a documentary. As he zigzags across the nation, Borat meets real people in real situations with hysterical consequences. His backward behavior generates strong reactions around him exposing prejudices and hypocrisies in American culture. In some cases, Borat’s interview subjects embrace his outrageous views on race and sex by agreeing with him, while others attempt to offer a patriotic lesson in Western values.”¹¹

In *Borat*, Sacha Baron functions as a “go between” among an uninitiated audience from Kazakhstan, the nation he represents, and American society he tries to explore and understand (and report about it). He engages interview techniques in an outrageous way challenging the interviewees’ sense of dignity and wholeness. Pretending to be an uncivilized Kazakh, he hilariously questions the assumed political correctness in approaches to gender, politics, and media personae.

We are compelled to admit, however, that *Borat* is a mockumentary in a different sense compared to Michael Moore’s films. Although it shows data gathering and interviews performed by the main character, the outrageous nature of questions and behaviors elicited by Borat creates a comedic effect not anticipated by the interviewees in the film nor its audiences.

On top of the difference between the types of documentary these films represent, we face a confusion related to the authorial persona in both films. Moore never denies that he is the author, the director, and the performer in the film. Conversely, Sacha Baron Cohen is only a performer in the film directed by Larry Charles, who plays the part of the naive and uneducated journalist from the far, far East somewhere in Asia.

A lot has been written about *Borat*. In fact, an entire edition of *Slavic Review* (Vol. 67, No. 1, Spring 2008) has been published about the film under the title “‘Borat’: Selves and Others.” Authors discuss the film in the context of national

11 Rotten Tomatoes, “Borat Film Review,” accessed 10 Oct 2016, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com>.

identity, “the other,” mock-documentary and other areas. From my point of view and for my purposes, the most interesting analysis has been presented by Natalie Kononenko and Svitlana Kukharenko. Both authors, of Eastern European background, shed new light on the film. Kononenko and Kukharenko, in their article “Borat the Trickster: Folklore and the Media, Folklore in the Media,”¹² present Borat as a quintessential trickster, a persona well known in the literature and art of Slavic nations.

Narcisz Fejes, on the other hand, treats Borat as a Dracula-like character who, on his way of discovery of customs and mores of America, tries to colonize the land and impose his atavistic and primitive values on the land of “the civilized.” In his essay “Feared Intrusions,” Fejes concludes his intricate and meticulous analysis with the declaration that Borat, in fact, exposed American quasi-values to a greater degree than he showed his lack of manners and understanding in a civilized world. As Fejes states,

Borat’s ability to expose what hides behind the American characters’ teaching fervor as well as a veneer of multiculturalism and liberalism can make the Western audience somewhat unsettled and feel prompted to prepare for Borat’s – or, Sacha Baron Cohen’s – next trick and uncanny performance.¹³

In both cases, of Moore and Sacha Baron Cohen, we deal with explosive authorial personae, each of which are realized in a different way, and impose their own interpretation on the presented reality. While Moore is highly critical of the actors in his documentary dramas, Sacha Baron Cohen wants to amuse people in a sarcastic and abusive way. In both cases of authorial creativity, they disrupt order and subvert decency in a carnival’s way presenting subjects as totally ridiculous.

In the introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin voices one of the most important statements that has defined his career as one of the most important theoreticians of the twentieth century:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.

12 Natalie Kononenko and Svitlana Kukharenko, “Borat the Trickster: Folklore and the Media, Folklore in the Media,” *Slavic Review*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 8–18, accessed 09 September 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27652761>.

13 Narcisz Fejes, “Feared Intrusions: A Comparative Reading of Borat and Dracula,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (2011), p. 1007.

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore, such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations.¹⁴

We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the “inside out,” of the “turnabout,” of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, and of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, and comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed: it is to a certain extent a parody of the extra carnival life, a “world inside out.”¹⁵

Both Michael Moore and Sacha Baron Cohen respond to these characteristics. They uncrown figures of authority, and the arrogance of the United States (supposedly “the best country in the world”). They tear their subjects’ self-assuredness to shreds by exposing their weaknesses and lack of logical argument. They turn into self-reflective fools pretending to know nothing but in fact performing their mockumentary personae to leave audiences shaken to the core.

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14 Mikhael Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, transl. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 10.

15 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 11.

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