

THE ORIENT IN POSTWAR POLISH CINEMA: RECONNAISSANCE

One could venture an observation that, unlike other literary and cultural periods such as Romanticism and Modernism (interwar period), the postwar period in Polish cinema suffers from a paucity of oriental themes, Middle Eastern (broadly: Arabic) and especially Far Eastern. It is difficult to pinpoint any other possible cause of this fact apart from the very obvious one, namely that Poland had been cut off from much of the world during the Polish People's Republic. This explanation is all the more feasible, seeing that after 1989, along with the political transformation, came a discernable increase in representations of the Orient. However, instead of searching for reasons and explanations, perhaps it is better to consider exactly what kind of representations of the Eastern and Arabic world one can find in these works, e.g. **in the context of such notions and phenomena as exoticism, postcolonialism, orientalism or the clash of cultures**. How does our cinema represent those cultures and our confrontations with them when someone from Poland goes to their land and in the case when oriental culture finds its way to us?

The West-East/Orient is always first depicted in terms of a spatial and then temporal opposition, both of which can be complementary. The language of space can express the world of values. It has always been the case that both literature and art tend to enter into the domain of myth. However, art has also developed discernable measures

which neutralize the mythic dimension of the West-East relation. It is important to notice how Polish cinema treats, i.e. narrativizes, the aforementioned opposition. **Is the Orient only a narrative space in this opposition, or is it, to a certain extent, a social space, a discourse which tells us something about Polish reality?**

I. The Exoticism of the East

Without a doubt, the dominant image of the Orient in postwar Polish cinema is one of exotic space, full of adventure and fantasy, a space that is different, strange, and distant, culturally and geographically, from our everyday environment. Sometimes, this image is presented within a historical perspective, e.g. in such films as *Colonel Wolodyjowski* (Jerzy Hoffman 1969), *In Desert and Wilderness*, especially in the first adaptation from 1973 by Władysław Ślesicki, and *The Golden Mahmudia* (1987 Kazimierz Tarnas). To that list one might add stories in which the East (also the so-called Near East, Arabic) is a place of action and adventure, as in Marek Piestrak's *Curse of Snakes Valley* (1988), where a part of the plot takes place on the Laos/Vietnam border, *Operation Simoom* (1999 Władysław Pasikowski), which takes place in Iraq, or the aforementioned *The Golden Mahmudia*, which takes place in Bulgaria near the Black Sea, though the story deals with the Turkish occupation of this region from centuries back. It would seem that for many years (approximately after the 1990s), these were the kind of images one found of places containing certain **elements of the Orient. They tended to take the form of stereotypes rooted in pop culture. These images, as well as the whole cinematic universe, are highly stylized**, which is something that can be seen both in movies obviously meant for entertainment and commercial purposes as well as in independent films of the greats. *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* by Wojciech J. Has is a case in point. In this movie we see Emina (Iga Cembrzyńska) and Zibelda (Joanna Jędryka), the Muslim cousins of the main character, van Worden (Zbigniew Cybulski), who attempt to convert him to Islam, but are depicted as representations of Oriental erotic temptation, not as horrible succubas. Similarly, the Sheikh of the Gomelez (Kazimierz Opaliński) is more likely to prompt laughter in the viewer than faith in his might. The same tendency can be noticed with other characters in the film, whose exoticism is evoked by

inscribing them seamlessly into the phantasmagoric, surrealist scenography, which helps build the Arabian atmosphere, full of irony, playfulness and adventure, following Jan Potocki, who used in his novel the structure of *One Thousand and One Nights*. As far as this type of character is concerned, it is worth remembering that there is a comic book dimension of Andrzej Kondratiuk's *Hydro Puzzle* (1970) represented in the form of the grotesque protagonist – the Maharaja of Kabur, played by Roman Kłosowski. This character brings to the film elements of eastern orientalism, though in a rather comic tone, brought about partly by the actor himself, whose previous work draws association with plebian characters and whose face does not correspond to our image of an Arabic prince. In this way the exotic character not only introduces an oriental-fantastic element into the presented space, but also attempts to emphasize its own artificiality, conventionality and, in a word, its arbitrariness in a distinctly stylized world, immersed as it is in a comic book pedigree.

Far Eastern (i.e. exotic) land has also been represented as a possible destination of our insurgents and fugitives. This is the case in Jacek Bromski's *Love in the Year of the Tiger* (2005), which depicts a Polish officer in 1913–1914 who escapes a Siberian prison in Manchuria and is later taken in by a Chinese peasant family. There he experiences a forbidden love with a young Chinese woman, the daughter of the Chinese family. The film's environment is, unfortunately, drawn with a broad brush, replete with stereotypical images, evoking all too easily the exoticism of the surroundings: snow. A similar characteristic can be found in another film which takes place at the beginning of the twentieth century also in Manchuria, *The End of the World* (1999) by Magdalena Łazarkiewicz. This Russian/Chinese borderland is where the Russians are building a railway and it is where Polish exiles have been sent by the force of history to do hard labor. This melodramatic story is subordinated to its scenery to such a degree that one might ask whether it was not merely an excuse to locate it in such a distant place. What is important is that the Siberia depicted in both these films has become increasingly more Asian, Far Eastern, i.e. mysterious, dangerous and domineering and to a lesser degree tied to Russian culture.

Curse of Snakes Valley, a Polish/Russian coproduction from the late 1980s, written by Marek Piestrak, occupies a separate place among movies focusing on exoticism. Adapted from Robert Stratton's novel,

the film preserves the novel's setting, placing the story in various periods, going sometimes as far back as the Indo-China War from the 1950s. Most importantly, the director is attempting to emulate Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones*. Unfortunately, in his attempt to follow in the footsteps of *Raiders of the Lost Arc*, Piestrak, failing to employ pastiche or at least parody, instead resorts to direct imitation.

Exotic places, mysterious events, often drawn from the past (see also: *The Golden Mahmudia*), as well as action and adventure plots, have all too often led our filmmakers astray. We could add that **Polish cinema has managed to tame this exotic mystery by making use of familiar images**, far removed from the pretensions held by the West to supervise less developed cultures, understood by researchers of orientalism as the great Western narrative. Instead of this, these films present **picture-postcard places with an exotic stamp**. What is important here is the changing story and backdrop with the type of egotism being completely interchangeable. These films are based on stereotypes which draw on that type of knowledge held by the viewers. This is clearly visible in some sitcoms, e.g. *Zmiennicy (Subs)* (Stanisław Bereja 1986). One of the supporting, albeit important, characters is Kraszán Bhamarandzaga (Piotr Pręgowski), a Siamese (Thai) student at the Polytechnics in Poland. This character, who speaks in comically broken Polish, is a mafia liaison embroiled in the drug trade between Asia and Poland. It would seem that he embodies the satirical image of the usually rich or industrious foreigners living in the poor but otherwise streetwise Poland of the 1980s. The character of the Easterner created by our cinema is perhaps a more interesting and slightly more complex character, though nonetheless based on stereotypes.

II. Intruder and enemy from the East

A foreigner, a person from the East is often an enemy or a traitor. At least that is the image portrayed in the adaptation of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Colonel Wolodyjowski* (dir. Jerzy Hoffman 1969) and *With Fire and Sword* (dir. Jerzy Hoffman 1999); it is also an image to be found in the adaptation of Witkacy's *Insatiability* (dir. Wiktor Grodecki 2003) and *Operation Simoom* (1999), based on Władysław Pasikowski's series. Cinema which draws on Sienkiewicz's tradition is unable to

liberate itself from the stereotypical image ascribed to people from the East, who are often depicted as wild, dangerous, but also fascinating in their physical, cultural and mental otherness. This is especially visible in *Colonel Wolodyjowski*, where the most fascinating character is Azja Tuhajbejowicz (son of the Tatar, Tuhaj-bej known from the novel and film adaptation, *With Fire and Sword*) played by Daniel Olbrychski. Wild, passionate, aggressive, deceptive and deceived, he enlisted in the Turkish army which was at that time marching for Europe. This depiction yields an image of a man who is brutal, uncompromising and vindictive, someone who still has Asian blood running through his veins, despite all his experiences in Poland. This is a man who is authentically fascinated by Polish women but is rejected by them on account of his race. The adaptation of this work is reminiscent of the way other parts of the *Trilogy* had been adapted for the screen. The viewer was to have the easiest possible task. Rafał Marszałek, discussing the adaptation of *Colonel Wolodyjowski*, wrote:

The generic diversity rooted in the novel lends itself well to a film adaptation. Hoffman combined the elements of a romance with elements of action-adventure in a cloak and dagger convention. The chivalric saga tone gave the story seriousness; the symbolic content, though coupled only with military matters, were all the more visible in the film. The author's emphasis on descriptions and the film's well-paced plot contributed to the ease and pervasiveness of the films reception. (Marszałek 1994: 70).

The same characteristics can be found in the adaptation of *With Fire and Sword*. The image of the Orient knocking on the gates of Western civilization is here different from the one found in *Colonel Wolodyjowski*, as it is less individualized and more reminiscent of a colorful goblin pieced together from many characters representing the court of the Crimean Khan, Islam III Giray (Adam Ferency). The leader of the Crimean Tatars stands out from this crowd, as well as his trusted Tuhaj-bej (Daniel Olbrychski), once again depicted as being dangerous and brave to the point of madness like Azja in *Colonel Wolodyjowski* (where the actor years earlier played the character's descendent). The khan usually appears in this film in the presence of his court – people living in the lap of luxury, fiery, full of expressive gestures and glances, wearing colorful makeup and clothes, and all cast in a decadent spirit in an erotic context quite distant from Sienkiewicz's novel. Khan

is seen fondling a beautiful transvestite sitting by his side, which is a visible sign not only of his otherness but also his decay and the impending fall of the Eastern horde. That is, the enemy is not only cruel and deceptive (like in the roles portrayed by Olbrychski) but is also completely disparate in his erotic preferences.

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Insatiability*, published in 1930, presents yet another type of enemy from the East knocking on the gates of Poland and Europe. Wiktor Grodecki wrote and directed adaptation, employing in it elements of the grotesque to depict the Western world of 1997, a world in danger of being consumed by Chinese pan-communism, against which only Poland is still putting up a fight. Michał Jakubik, who played Wang Tang, the Mandarin leader and main ideologue of the Chinese, inscribed himself well into this convention. In *Insatiability* the threat of Eastern totalitarization is personified, on the one hand, by the stereotypically stylized image of "a Chinese Mandarin" in terms of his external characteristics (appropriate clothes, haircut, etc.) and, on the other, by grotesque behavior, e.g. yelling out strange sounds. Apart from that, Wang is also characterized by the cunning, sadistic, domineering manner with which he treats his own people and Poles, as well as by cruelty, a trait stereotypically ascribed to people from the Far East.

In turn, Pasikowski's *Operation Simoom* places the enemy in the Near East, specifically in Iraq. Polish cinema rarely ventures off to this region of the world, though this is recently beginning to change. In the eponymous mission in 1990 Polish special forces helped to extract a few American spies from Iraq. The political relevance and suspense of the action sequences portrayed in the film are undercut by the fact that the Iraqi soldiers and policemen are completely powerless to deal with the Polish commandoes. The Iraqis are a weak and anonymous enemy, as if unworthy of a more nuanced psychological portrayal; they are a collective opponent that is easily fooled, despite the reputation of their dangerous leader – Saddam Hussein. The film depicts shrewd Poles outmaneuvering their enemy at every turn; these enemies not only by virtue of alliances but, or perhaps also, by virtue of personal reasons: one of the characters has to rescue his son from an Iraqi prison after he finds himself there because of inappropriate acquaintances. In all, the battle is rather an adventure in an exotic environment, which compels us to return to the influence of Henryk Sienkiewicz on Polish cinema. In this regard, his novel *In Desert and*

Wilderness and its two film adaptations play an important role, as they raise questions related to the presence and development of the colonial stance as well as its later modifications. Although, of course, the story takes place in Africa, not in the Near East or Asia, the image of Arabs, as they are depicted in those novels, is characteristic for those geo-cultural areas.

Returning to Sienkiewicz and his *In Desert and Wilderness*, we can observe in this work an aversion towards Arabs and the construction of a defined negative representation of another race. For instance, let us turn our attention to the negative representation of the Mahdi (Messiah) and his fellow tribesmen. We know today that the Mahdist War in Sudan was part of the independence struggle (1881–84, 1899 – local forces were eventually quelled by Anglo-Egyptian forces), though not without religious fanaticism. To some extent we should agree with the fact that, generally speaking, this perspective on the Other is rooted in a certain area of Polish literature permeated with colonial ideology, e.g. the *Adventures of Tomek* series written by Alfred Szklarski, even though paradoxically it originated in a country that did not possess colonies. Furthermore, we can make the following claim, in line with Edward W. Said's thesis included in *Orientalism*:

Therefore as much as the West itself, The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (Said 1977: 5)

The East in Polish cinema is, similarly as in the Orientalist discourse, an invention, and a fiction, in this case a fiction created, to a large extent, by Sienkiewicz and his adaptors, and as such should not be construed as an objective, neutral representation of reality and its representatives. The dominant feature of this representation is a fantasy concerning the threat from the East, which has to be eliminated here or there (*Operation Simoom, Mission Afghanistan*). **This thinking coincides with a colonial perspective, which can be seen on the example of two adaptations of *In Desert and Wilderness*, were in the first, by Władysław Ślesicki, we can find echoes of the following opinion:**

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include nations that certain territories and people require and

beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination. (Said 1994: 9)

In the first adaptation of Sienkiewicz's novel, the Mahdi and other Arabs are represented as people resorting to violence as a means of achieving their military and political aims: they are ready to imprison children who came from other parts of the world, in this case Staś and Nell, who, in turn, represent courage and determination that no one would expect of them. Only with Gavin Hood's adaptation of Sienkiewicz's novel did this perspective give way to a more developed and balanced depiction of Whites – Arabs – Blacks in Africa, which was earlier presented by the Polish author, and then both filmmakers. As Michał Rogoż noticed, in Hood's film the main characters are not Staś and Nell, but Africans – Kali and Mea, who embody African wisdom (Rogoż 2012: 516).

Moreover, we have to agree with Rogoż in yet another matter: Africa is presented in this work as heaven on earth and not as a place of adventure and war. This way Hood reverses the proportions of how this continent had been represented by his predecessor by shifting attention to the black natives and also, which is key, by minimally accentuating Arab violence connected with their struggle for independence. However, for this to happen the director had to be an African. Incidentally, this directing job was fortuitous, because the previous director, Maciej Dudkiewicz, fell ill and was persuaded by the producer, Waldemar Dziki, to find a replacement.

III. Taming the Other

In recent years, an important and a frequent perspective on how someone from the East functions in contact with Poles or, what is even more interesting, in contemporary Poland. **Often, it is no longer the enemy but the Other who slowly becomes familiar and with some difficulties is eventually tamed**, also through love. This is the situation we find in, e.g. the Polish-Swedish film by Agnieszka Łukasik, *Between Two Fires* (2010). After escaping from a Belarusian mafia operating a child trafficking ring, a Polish woman makes her way to a refugee camp, where she gets involved in a difficult love affair with an Algerian fugitive, and encounters obstacles of an action-adventure variety. Love gives both protagonists their desired meaning in life

and is also something that is sought and found by characters from the previously mentioned films, which take place in Manchuria. It is interesting, however, to turn our attention to the Other from the East, who gains experience in contact with contemporary Poland. Three films are especially telling in this regard, as they portray this problem in different conventions, which are: comedic as in *Extras* (2006 Michał Kwieciński), drama and thriller as in *My Flesh My Blood* (2009 Marcin Wrona), and independent/poetic as is the case with *Essential Killing* (Jerzy Skolimowski 2010), an international coproduction including Poland.

Extras is an example of a film within a film. A Chinese film crew comes to Poland in search of extras with somber faces (they heard that in Poland they will find plenty of such people) for a bleak melodrama they are filming. For this purpose they chose a small, provincial town of Konin and its residents. The volunteers are comprised of ordinary, common people, often with difficult pasts, for example Bożena (Kinga Preis), who was abandoned a few years ago by her fiancé when she was with child. She made up for her unsuccessful private life by learning Chinese, which has now proven useful during the casting. However, contrary to the expectations and assumptions of the film crew, these ordinary people begin to shine and come alive on the set of the film. In time the Chinese film crew begin to appreciate Polish hospitality and particularly the Polish fondness for feasting, and the Poles in turn begin to discover in their guests something else than slant-eyed characters from some martial arts film screaming at one another incomprehensibly. Stereotypes and communication difficulties are partially overcome in accord with the conventions of a situational comedy; however, these conventions are also the basis for the comedy. The film's conclusions are, therefore, obvious: Poland is not only a good place for a film location and the exotic Chinese are just like any other nation in their universal human reactions and needs. There is nothing in this film that would suggest a clash of civilizations, whose drama and finality were described by Samuel Huntington; it is replaced by familiar and homey images, which eliminate the exoticism and the otherness of the Other. However, it is also the case that our cinema describes these contacts in a more dramatic way, as testified above by *My Flesh My Blood* and *Essential Killing*.

In Marcin Wrona's feature-length debut, *My Flesh My Blood*, a known boxer (Eryk Lubos), after learning of his terminal illness,

decides to leave behind something meaningful – a new life, and so he sets off to find a woman that would provide him with an offspring. He happens to come across a young Vietnamese woman (Luu De Ly), who is illegally working in Warsaw. As a representative of Warsaw's Vietnamese community centered around the 10th Anniversary Stadium and also as a young woman, her social status is precarious, a fact that our protagonist takes advantage of for his own aims. His male chauvinism, which prompts him to treat this woman as an object for sexual and procreational fulfillment, also leads him to treat her as someone weaker by virtue of her race and her lack of access to the rights and privileges he enjoys. Her Otherness in this regard defines her weaker position. This initial situation changes, as with time Yen Ha begins to capture more lodgments in this "sex war" (and culture war), becoming increasingly more aware of how much she is needed by this man. The end of the film, however, reasserts – to a certain extent – the dominance of the white male, who before his death entrusts Yen Ha to his friend, who is to take care of her and his child. This is an arrangement agreed upon by both parties. Katarzyna Klimkiewicz's half-hour long *Hanoi-Warszawa* (2010) depicts the Vietnamese community in a similar, although less brutal, way. This film presents the Vietnamese as an invisible minority, which has to serve and remain anonymous in their numbers. A Polish woman is indifferent towards this mass, though any Polish-Vietnamese emotional relations are seen every time as an exception to this attitude. *My Flesh My Blood* also proves that although stereotypical ideas of an inferior race and inferior sex are still very much alive in Poland, these stereotypes can be undermined by the mere presence of people who are representatives of these stereotypes. Their patient presence gradually leads towards reconciliation, though this process seems to take a long time.

The plight of an Asian immigrant in our country is most dramatically represented in Jerzy Skolimowski's film (even though the Polish setting is inferred). In *Essential Killing* we follow Mohammed (Vincent Gallo), who is either a Taliban member connected to terrorism or merely an ordinary and unjustly imprisoned Muslim, as he escapes from a secret American base in Central Europe (Poland?). Besieged from all sides, he is ready to go to any lengths to survive, but, on the other hand, it is precisely in those conditions that he is able to find selfless help. Skolimowski presents this clash of two worlds and two civiliza-

tions by way of paradoxes. The fugitive, in this case the main character with the camera following his every step, does not utter one word, and his motivation is presented as being solely physical and biological. He learns of this motivation from his environment by means of the dynamic action. We never discover any deeper motivation related to his past. He is alone and cornered, and also extremely dangerous. The military machine which has been deployed against him is anonymous and disproportionately large. In such conditions, anyone would give in, turned to a hunted animal. On the other hand, as I have indicated earlier, the audience might see in him a human and will endow him with the humanity that he is denied by the world. **What is significant is that the Other in dramatic films does not speak, does not verbalize his or her desires and dreams; it can only communicate with gestures and facial expressions** (like the female character in *My Flesh My Blood*, who is for the male protagonist the embodiment of passivity and subservience, the object of erotic desire, and the embodiment of male imperial fantasies) or with pure activity (like Muhammad escaping in Skolimowski's film). There is also the image of Afghanistan full of Taliban and NATO soldiers from the television show *Misja Afganistan* (*Mission Afghanistan*). Maciej Dejcz, the director of this show, attempts to be completely neutral as he realistically depicts war. There are ordinary, good Afghans, even cooperating with the army, but there are also those who ambush and destroy convoys. Dejcz does not avoid the most difficult topic: the possibility of civilians being killed by Western military forces, including Polish forces. This distant war is presented as a confrontation of vague and ambiguous arguments and positions, something that is best observed in the doubts, breakdowns and mistakes made by our soldiers.

Taking into consideration the still small number of Polish films portraying the Orient and its representatives, **it is impossible to see in any of them indications of "a clash of civilizations" in Samuel Huntington's understanding, i.e. a geopolitical concept that assumes a radical contradistinction between Western civilization and others** (nota bene, this is a term that has come under criticism from, among others, Edward W. Said for its racism and colonialism *par excellence*). Even though most films belong to the second group, which represent Asians, Arabs or Muslims as enemies, this situation is slowly beginning to change. On the whole, many films deal with the

process of defining their own stance and identity in relation toward the Oriental Other. These are constructed, to a large extent, on the Same/Other opposition, expressed by means of a historical/action-adventure narrative or, in newer works, by action-drama, where it is possible to observe another image of this relation by discerning in the foreigner an Other who is now the object of the camera's interest and respect. **To this day Polish cinema has not widened its space of understanding, though filmmakers are certainly not against their Oriental characters; in fact, they are trying to evoke in the audience some kind of understanding, and even – quite often – empathy for these characters.** The question is whether the latter stance is also part of the imperial-colonial discourse? We should remember that no discourse represents reality neutrally and transparently, but works to ideologize it. We should notice that the problem of binary oppositions is gradually disappearing. In Poland this process is based on our history, economic development and geopolitical conditions, which have all rendered inclusion, obviously symbolic in any of these universes, changeable and unclear. We can see the reflection of this in our cinema also in regards to our relationship with the Orient.

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