

# **Migration in Polish Documentaries: *The Siberian Lesson* and “Small Homeland”**

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## **Introduction**

Film has always been at the center of post-war Polish culture, and countless theses have been written on its influence. This study analyzes the filming of one particular documentary that was created after the fall of communism, focusing on the universal theme of “travel and migration” in documentaries. *The Siberian Lesson* (1998) was Wojciech Staroń’s directorial debut in documentaries. In addition to being a coming-of-age tale of a young female schoolteacher, it is also a record of a love affair as the lead character was also Staroń’s girlfriend (and later his wife). Moreover, it depicts the discovery of, and an adventure in, the “unknown” land of Siberia. The film was a major success, and Staroń received a number of awards both domestically and internationally, becoming famous practically overnight.

What is it about this film that captivates people? It has a simple, easy-to-understand story; its images and music beautifully express feelings; and it presents a heroine who earnestly attempts to do her best despite difficult circumstances. However, perhaps an even larger factor than these traits is the film’s outlook on the world, which is expressed in all of these aspects and with which many people from differing societies could empathize. Nonetheless, the film does not force opinions or values onto its audience. It does not lead them to a simple solution; instead it quietly refuses to be classified as a medium with a simple meaning. I intend to highlight the particularly Polish characteristics present within this film.

Indeed, the film overlaps with trends in contemporary Polish literature. As will be described later, the relationship between politics and culture is extremely strong in Poland and politics and the social environment have always had a significant influence on the development of culture. Consequently, both culture and film have come to share numerous issues in each respective era.

## Overview of the History of Documentaries

Before delving into *The Siberian Lesson*, a brief description of the social situation surrounding Polish film and culture will be presented. The summer of 1989, when Poland peacefully transitioned from a totalitarian state into a democratic one, is generally considered to be a major turning point in Polish history. The revolution led by the trade union “Solidarity” that ended the socialist system, which was considered to be “the root of all evil,” was openly believed by many people at the time to be the solution to all of their physical and psychological problems. However, a short number of years later, the public recognized that this great revolution was not a panacea that would solve every problem, but instead, depending on the circumstances, may in fact worsen people’s situations.

Politics and the economy were not the only targets of criticism, but also culture. Following the fall of communism, there were concerns that the “Polskość,” which forms the foundation of Polish culture, might be disappearing, and this also included fears for Polish films. In writing about films produced after 1989, Ewa Likowska appealed for Polish films to be saved from the crisis in which they were mired. Her 2002 article, “Polish Films are Drowning,” also quoted famous film directors and critics that agreed with her sentiments.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly, cultural degradation brought about as a result of the collapse of socialism would be ironic. In fact, aside from a period in the 1950s when the Polish Film School was flourishing, critics have constantly had the perception that the Polish film industry is in crisis. As was

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<sup>1</sup> Ewa Likowska, “Polskie kino tonie,” *Przegląd*, 29/04, pp. 38–39 [<http://www.przegląd-tygodnik.pl/pl/artykul/polskie-kino-tonie>] Web. 08. 05. 2013.

noted by Ewa Marzierska, the voices of dissatisfaction at this time, rather than indicating the problem to be a decline in the quality of films, can be considered to be reflecting the frustration that a life free from Communism had not turned out to be as hoped.<sup>2</sup>

In short, the problem was that Polish culture had begun to show a diversity never seen before, even beginning to include subcultures. For example, the exiled writer Kazimierz Brandys, who died in Paris, discussed the cultural “unification” of Poland under the communist regime. Under the communist regime, all of the writers inside and outside Poland wrote of resisting totalitarianism; that is, they wrote for and against specific groups. As such, their lives were always filled with tension as they were attuned to the dynamism of society.<sup>3</sup> However, at present, the writers no longer have a common enemy, a “root of all evil,” to confront.

During the Communist era, Polish documentary-makers were completely dependent on funding from the state, but even so, they originally produced films that contained anti-government content and that bravely broke the taboo of addressing socialist realism. With the development of the “thaw” that began in the mid-1950s with the death of Stalin, the Polish Film School emerged and films that depicted the dark side of life began to appear. A series of approximately 20 films, called the “Black Series” (“Czarna Seria”), used as their themes the social ills that until that period could absolutely not be discussed, such as delinquency, prostitution, and alcoholism. In this way, they indirectly criticized the system.

The period from the end of the 1960s until the end of the 1970s coincided with the generation of Krzysztof Kieślowski, and documentaries improved to an even higher level. Copies of documentaries that depicted the darker aspects of reality at this time were confiscated by the authorities and often were not screened until the era of the Solidarity movement.

The introduction of martial law in 1981 had a serious impact on Polish film in its entirety. As the authorities imposed a ban, many on-

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2 Ewa Mazierska, *Polish Postcommunist Cinema* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp.12–13.

3 Kazimierz Brandys, *Miesiące. 1982–1987* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1998), pp. 106–107.

going projects were suspended or discontinued and, as can be expected, the filming of documentaries was prohibited for a time. Hopeful signs began to appear during the democratization process and, in 1987, the state's monopoly on film production and distribution, as well as on purchasing foreign films, was abolished as a new law was enacted. Censorship was abolished in 1990, and the themes of films and their production methods changed rapidly. State-independent film companies made most of the documentaries designed for television broadcast. Polish films as a whole declined at the beginning of the 1990s as commercial aspects came to be prioritized and cinemas were overrun with Hollywood movies.

Nonetheless, the conditions for documentaries recovered in the second half of the 1990s. The number of documentaries increased such that they are currently the main form of Polish film. Paradoxically, this trend is related to the power of television. The number of documentaries produced in one year has grown to between 150 and 200, but the majority are broadcast on television where they are immensely popular among viewers. Since 1996, the state-produced program *Czas na dokument* (*Time for a Documentary*) has been screening high-quality documentaries and the popularity of this program shows no signs of waning. In general, television is seen as a symbol of the market economy and the decline of high culture; the merits and demerits of television are often discussed together. However, in post-communist Poland, television and documentaries share mutual benefits: television economically supports documentary makers, whereas documentaries support television through their popularity. Consequently, documentaries created for a discerning television audience in Poland have driven the growth of the genre to the extent that Poland's documentaries have won acclaim at international film festivals. *The Siberian Lesson*, the documentary discussed in this paper was also filmed with the financial support of a TV station, on which it was broadcast and became a hit.

According to Tadeusz Lubelski, the recent boom in documentaries is closely related to Poland's traditional values. In other words, even if a documentary in Poland addresses, for example, social problems and politics, it is ultimately not considered to be either a topical commentary or

propaganda but a work of art. Hence, no matter how political their themes, documentaries are evaluated and valued for their aesthetic aspects.<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Siberian Lesson***

As described above, Poland's documentaries have sensitively reflected social conditions. With the historical turning point of the fall of communism, which aspects of Polish documentaries have changed and which have not?

At the beginning of *The Siberian Lesson*, the following title card is shown:

After the collapse of communism there are many Poles living in the countries of the former Soviet Union. / The Polish government decided that the best assistance for them would be to organize Polish language courses. / Every year, approximately 100 teachers of Polish are sent to the places where the descendants of Polish exiles and emigrants live. / The teachers are unfamiliar with their places of assignment, and they can rely only on themselves.

The film focuses on Małgosia, a young Polish teacher, and Wojciech, who has just graduated from film school. The story begins at the end of August, when the two embark on a journey on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Małgosia is set to teach Polish to the children of Polish migrants while Wojciech intends to shoot a film about Małgosia, his girlfriend. Małgosia's destination is Usol'e-Sibirskoye, located 7,000 km from Poland. It is a town on the banks of the Angara River, approximately 100km from Lake Baikal, and has a number of chemical plants and a single working tram. Immediately after her appointment in September, her school is closed due to a strike and all of the teachers participate in a demonstration march. While facing a number of difficulties, Małgosia adapts to her life as a teacher in an unfamiliar land with the help of the

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4 Tadeusz Lubelski. "Współczesny polski film dokumentalny," Culture. pl, 2001 [http://www.culture.pl/baza-film-pelna-tresc/-/eo\_event\_asset\_publisher/eAN5/content/wspolczesny-polski-film-dokumentalny#historia] [accessed September 4th 2015].

warm-hearted people around her. She eventually begins to communicate with and understand her students and also experiences the short Siberian summer. Małgosia and Wojciech are married in the small local Catholic Church and finally they once again board the Trans-Siberian Railway to return to Poland.

An initial impression on seeing this film is that it is a very personal record. Małgosia's struggles are recorded dispassionately on film. There are not many shocking scenes; rather, the film closely follows the life she led over the course of one year and tells the intimate stories of both the heroine and the director. The phrase "I wanted to talk with myself" expresses that the documentary is composed of monologs by the narrator, who is also the heroine. This narration represents her thoughts and, from the beginning, we (the audience) feel as if we are reading her diary.

Set on a stage that is enclosed by the vast nature of Siberia, the film has a unique charm. It features farm work and the lives of farmers, the four seasons along the Angara River, fishing on the frozen river, walking on the surface of the river, and hiking deep into the taiga. The vividness of the imagery reflects Małgosia's feelings of utter surprise at what she experiences as a newcomer to Siberia. Beginning and ending with a scene on a train, this film is also a travel account of a journey in the extraordinary space of Siberia.

### **Story of Initiation and a "Small Homeland"**

Travel films, which are not simply travelers' diaries, came to occupy an important place during the first period of documentaries. This global exploration through images and sound can be compared to the opening of the first chapter in the history of documentaries.<sup>5</sup> Film is nothing more than the reconstruction of time and space and, therefore, film images are highly compatible with travel. People witness an unknown world and culture through the camera instead of witnessing it themselves, and the images are presented as entirely the experiences of the audience.

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5 Jeffrey Ruoff, "Introduction: The Filmic Forth Dimension: Cinema as Audiovisual Vehicle," in J. Ruoff ed., *Virtual Voyages. Cinema and Travel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. xi.

Meanwhile, in modern society, people regularly engage in travel and migration. People leave for destinations all over the world, bringing their cameras with them. Furthermore, the reduction in size and the increased prevalence of equipment such as home-video cameras has influenced the surge in “autobiographical documentaries” that concern filmmakers and the people around them. Another related aspect is the ease through which individuals can film their travels. *The Siberian Lesson* falls inside the category of such autobiographical documentaries.

This film has characteristics that exceed the framework of the autobiographical documentary genre, which generally consists of a mix of two kinds of films: those in which people film themselves, and travel films. In other words, this film is not simple in terms of classification. Along with the diversification of the values in actual Polish society, films have also become diversified. This trend applies both to their stories and structures, and modern films often straddle multiple genres.

*The Siberian Lesson* depicts the heroine’s (the director’s girlfriend) growth as a person. Małgosia departs on her journey saying “I wanted to leave all the annoying things behind me in Poland” but, on the fourth day of her journey, she begins to have feelings of loneliness and fear. Even after she arrives at her destination, she is still beset with problems, such as the strike at her workplace and conflicts in her living environment. After her period of work is finished and she returns to Poland, she reflects on the year as “the happiest time” in her life. The face of the heroine as she gazes from the window of the train that is taking her home seems to glow with the feeling of achievement.

“The Siberian Lesson” is not only about the heroine giving Polish lessons; it is also about the heroine receiving life lessons. In short, it is a *Bildungsroman* story of personal growth or of initiation. On one hand, the young heroine is helped by local people; on the other hand, her students come to rely on her and she grows as a person by working diligently for their development. Moreover, the heroine’s wedding to the director in the local church at the end of the film is the fulfillment of a separate story. The two place their hands on a frozen window and, laden with symbolic meaning, their handprints on the glass are immediately frozen coincidentally into the shape of a heart.

Previously, Jean-François Lyotard declared the transformation of knowledge in modern society as “the end of the big story,” and then announced the arrival of postmodernism as a successor to modernism. Meanwhile, within the new Polish literature created after the fall of communism, Przemysław Czapliński created the concept of a “small narrative” as a successor of the “big narrative.” Based on Stanisław Vincenz’s definition of the “small homeland,” Czapliński established the extremely Polish literary genre of “literature of the small homeland” and this became the dominant literary theme in Poland for a decade after 1989. The concept of the “small homeland” is originally connected to the history of changes to Poland’s territories after World War II. The region known as “Kresy” in the borderlands of eastern Poland was an affluent area inhabited by various ethnic groups with many languages and cultures. The situation completely changed in the post-war period due to the movement of country borders and forced migration. The territory that was lost at this time, the “small homeland,” was depicted by a new generation of writers as “a place where, even though everyone is different, nobody is a foreigner.” The writers considered this territory to be “Arcadia, where people with the help of nature and communal ceremonies discover a connection with eternity.” This mythical topos is associated with a historical fact. Young writers born mainly from 1960 onwards, who were the driving force behind novels in the 1990s, had no actual memories of the loss of this homeland as they only heard the memories of their parent’s generation, the actual migrants. Therefore, the authors can define the “small homeland” in a fashion that is most convenient for them and add mythical aspects to it. Precisely for this reason, this “fictitious homeland” frequently connects to accounts of the heroine’s/hero’s growth and to *Bildungsroman*-type elements.

After the fall of communism, Polish films tended to depict “small narratives,” with the same private, personal, and local prose. This preference can be said to be a natural result of the advance of culture up to that time, in which a romantic type of social duty had become popular. As globalization advanced, people became more inclined to search for their roots, consequently longing for a lost and idealized homeland. *The*



*Siberian Lesson* is the story of an initiation and seems to also be about a “small homeland;” however, it may be an anomalous variant of this.<sup>6</sup>

## Traveling Nostalgia

Of course, there is no Polish territory in Siberia. Siberia was used as a location for the penal colonies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and many of the Polish people who now live there are descendants of Poles who were forced by Stalin to migrate there. Staroń was also conscious of the history of the land,<sup>7</sup> and Małgosia came to area to teach the people who lived far away from their homeland and their mother tongue.

Even so, the Siberia in this film is represented as a certain type of communal utopia. At first, Małgosia is fearful about living in Siberia, but after two months, she becomes accustomed to it. Eventually, she describes her time spent living there as “the happiest” in her life. She was moved by the sight of simple people engaged in farm work; the primitive rhythms of the farmers’ lives appeared in a refreshingly idealized manner to her eyes.

The representation of Siberia’s utopianism in this film is not only based on nature and farming. The film also provides its audience with a heady sense of nostalgia. For Poles, Siberia is mentally and geographically distant. Despite this, the heroine, and also the audience who see Siberia through her eyes, cannot help but feel nostalgia for the (fictitious)

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6 Rybicka, admitting the “small homeland” to be the most important and historically accepted concept in Polish literature in 1990’s, highlighted that this opinion has been drawing much criticism for its inconsistency, such as its escapism. In her book, Rybicka refers to it as a “relinquished project.” Elżbieta Rybicka, *Geopoetyka* (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), pp. 325–338.

7 Staroń traveled around Kazakhstan when he was a student and became acquainted with fellow Poles who had been placed in a labor camp (*gulag*) in Siberia when they were children. Somehow, they escaped and had traveled as far as Alma-Ata. After finally arriving there in 1998, 70 years after their forced migration, they were able to achieve their wish and return to Poland. Their story was later made into a film by Staroń entitled *Bracia* (released in 2013).

Siberia of this film. The reason for this emotion is that the documentary depicts how Poland used to be. In Siberia, the socialism that should have already collapsed is still alive. Fragmentary images become metonymy: strikes, demonstration marches, the red hammer-and-sickle flag of the Soviet Union hanging in meeting halls, people riding the tram for free, and ticket inspectors who do not inspect tickets on the tram. As she spent her childhood in the final period of the socialist era, these unusual Soviet spectacles are already relics of the past for Małgosia (as are the values of the film as a whole, as represented by her). Thus, her daily life in Siberia, which had been colored with such “unusual” experiences, combines with the physical distance of the land from her home, and comes to possess only a tenuous sense of reality for her.

In her book, Svetlana Boym says that “Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship.”<sup>8</sup> Only a person who does not have a sense of the reality of socialism can mythologize Siberia. For Małgosia, Siberia was not a place to settle down. In Siberia, her ordinary life was extraordinary, but neither was it was strange because she was in the middle of a journey. For example, in an episode titled “Picnic,” they visit a huge prison built during the time of the Czars. When they visit, the building was being used as a psychiatric hospital and Małgosia is shocked at the sight of the gloomy hospital rooms and patients suffering from mental illnesses. At night, lying on one of the beds available for visitors, she can hear the moans of the patients. However, the historical fact that this building is a reminder of Stalin’s regime of terror is not discussed in the film until the end. In other words, this entire episode is separated from history and has an aspect of unreality, at times even appearing illusory. A solar eclipse occurs at the same time as their visit, and the image of the haloed sun seen from the window of the prison lends a sense of mystery. In another example, the students in her Polish class are evaluated as follows: “Everyone is searching for something. For them, Polish is an escape from their everyday life.” In short, everyone in the class is on a journey called “a lesson” that deviates from their daily lives and reality.

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<sup>8</sup> Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xiii.

However, travel films depicting an “unknown” world are essentially imperialistic as they unilaterally place people into the standpoints of “people who see” and “people who are seen.”

During the long cold-war era, Polish films gave clues to the West about the Soviet form of socialism concealed behind the Iron Curtain. For the West, the East was an extremely interesting object of observation. After the fall of communism, Poland also involved itself with the wave of globalization. Within this context, globalization, as seen in moving depictions of a Polish women welcoming a girl from Africa into her home and striving to educate her, was also depicted hypocritically in some places (*Africański sen*, reż. Władysław Jurkow, 2008). This outcome may be because the person who sees such images feels a sense of superiority. This superiority complex might also be observed when those who used to be “people who are seen” become “people who see.”

The nostalgia in this film could be easily connected to an imperialistic view of the world. Staroń and his wife admitted they enjoy traveling, but they were not necessarily true nomads. In the strictest sense, their life was unrelated to roaming. With the success of this film, Staroń received a number of offers for work from both home and abroad and frequently moved with his family to live in various places in Europe. Finally, they subsequently moved to a village near Buenos Aires where they filmed the sequel to *The Siberian Lesson*, spending more than two years living with a family in South America. However, they declared that travel is its own important theme, and no matter how much they travel around the world, they (the director and his wife, now a producer) always have a place to which they could return.

At this point, the domestic and international increase in films about Poland after the fall of communism must be discussed, specifically those with Jewish themes. The number of documentaries depicting journeys by Jews seeking their origins has been increasing. Of course, these are travel films in the sense that the camera follows the course of their journey, but they also have a fundamentally different aspect. The goal of such films that focus on Jews is, above all, to search for the Jewish identity; hence, these films are not about the travel itself. Conversely, Staroń’s journey was ultimately in the interests of travel and thus bore the standpoints of

“people who see” and “people who film.”<sup>9</sup> That may also remind us of “consumption tourism,” a phenomenon discussed by John Urry in his book *Consuming Places*.<sup>10</sup> That is, the Siberia in this film could be one of the nostalgic images that are consumed in “Western” traveling-tourism.

## Conclusion

At the end of the film, the heroine is returning home and gazes out of the train window at the wetlands that cover Siberia during the summer. The Angara River is seen meandering between white birch trees. This calm scenery seems like a view from, for example, Kresy, the object of yearning in the works of Czesław Miłosz. In fact, it delivers a message that Siberia might be the origin of a lost Poland or its secret shadow.

Staroń, by depicting Siberia as a nostalgic utopia, consciously or unconsciously comes to terms with the gloomy past present in the film’s background. As neither a protest nor criticism, this type of calm but cool representation of a place may be said to be unique to the generation that drives Polish culture in the 21st century.

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9 In the 1989 film *Parade*, which depicts North Korea’s celebration of the 40th anniversary of its founding as a nation, the problems were more complex. At the time, Poland was allied with North Korea, but during the filming of the celebration, the North Korean side placed a condition on the film crew that no commentary was to be added to the images that were released. As a result, the meaning of the images without an accompanying explanation changed depending on the person who viewed them. This movie was highly evaluated based on different perspectives in North Korea, the West, and Poland, respectively. In North Korea, it was a film that correctly told of the wonder of North Korea and Kim Il-sung and represented the fanfare of communism. In the West, it was valuable reference material. In Poland, as the film was viewed prior to Poland’s democratization, the audience saw a totalitarian state in Asia that was the reality for them only a short while ago and it provoked terrible fear.

10 John Urry, *Consuming Places* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 129–151.