

THE PORTRAYAL OF WORKERS IN THE 1970s FILMS OF WOJCIECH WISZNIEWSKI

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Abstract

This article examines representation of workers in the 1970s films of the renowned Polish documentary filmmaker, Wojciech Wiszniewski (1946–1981), whose style is described as *creative documentary*. Wiszniewski is best known for questioning traditional *socialist* work ethics, as epitomised by the figure of a shock worker and his or her representation according to socialist realist aesthetics. In this way, his films make the viewers reflect on the difference between the 1950s and the 1970s, when they were made.

I will consider Wiszniewski's representations of shock workers and ordinary people in films such as *Opowieść o człowieku, który wykonał 552% normy* ("A Story of a Man Who Filled 552% of the Quota", 1973), *Wanda Gościmińska, włóknianka* ("Wanda Gościmińska, A Weaver", 1975) and *Stolarz* ("The Carpenter", 1976) against the background of the Polish history and ideology of state socialism.

Keywords: *Wojciech Wiszniewski, creative documentary, shock worker, state socialism, Edward Gierek.*

In this article I will analyse representation of workers in the 1970s films of Wojciech Wiszniewski. Wiszniewski is best known for questioning traditional *socialist* work ethics, as epitomised by the figure of a shock worker and his or her representation according to socialist realist aesthetics, therefore at first sight his films appear to belong to the 1950s rather than the 1970s. By the same token, however, they make the viewers reflect on the difference between *then* and *now* (where *now* is the time when Wiszniewski made his films). His works also break the boundaries between fiction and documentary cinema. Wiszniewski's films are

classified as *creative documentaries* and Mirosław Przyłipiak goes as far as asking whether we should use the term *documentary* at all to describe them [Przyłipiak 1984: 16].

I will take a route from the general to the particular, and from the past to the present. I will first present the 1970s and then move to analysing the films. In my discussion I will employ a Marxist framework. This is because, in my opinion, no other thinker captured as adequately as Marx the reality of work under capitalism and his analysis is still valid. The second reason is that, during the post-war period, until the fall of state socialism in 1989, the Polish economy and social life was allegedly organised according to Marxist principles. Using a Marxist lens thus allows us to ask whether and to what extent Polish reality adhered to the ideal of a *workers' paradise*.

My analysis can also be seen as a polemic with writing the history of East European cinema, first prevailing in the West, and after the fall of communism also in the East, which neatly divides these cinemas into a superior type, created by romantic dissidents and an inferior one, produced by filmmakers obedient to the regime (on such conceptualisation of the cinemas of Eastern Europe see Imre 2005: xii-xiv). Such an approach not only leads to a neglect by historians of the supposedly *inferior type*, but also to attempts to amplify the dissident stance of filmmakers belonging to the first group and playing down everything which might suggest their sympathy to the communist regime. In contrast to this approach, I attempt to demonstrate that the attitude of Wiszniewski to the communist idea and the practices of state socialism were more complex than this *romantic dissident versus oppressive state* paradigm suggests, and even that, from today's perspective, some of his films might be seen as apologies of this system.

The 1970s as a watershed

From the perspective of European economy and politics, the 1970s (which metaphorically began after 1968) constitute a watershed. At the beginning of the decade, Western countries conformed to rules, set out by Henry Ford and John Maynard Keynes, which defined a specific version of capitalism, known as "embedded liberalism", because under this system the economy was embedded in state institutions. It was also marked by heavy taxation, a drive towards near-full employment and maintaining the welfare state. By the end of the 1970s the West took a new direction towards neoliberalism, marked by the financialisation of all spheres of economic activity and human life [Harvey 2005]. Under neoliberalism, as in the classical Marxist model of capitalism, money is the absolute king. The shift can thus be seen as a gradual purging of socialism from politics and economy.

In some Eastern European countries, including Poland, one could also

observe a movement away from the centralised and planned economy towards a more mixed system, in which private enterprises were, if not openly encouraged, then at least tolerated. In the 1970s the word *socialism* was frequently preceded by *real* or *actually existing*, suggesting that *real socialism* is not true socialism and Poles have to content themselves with an ersatz. Censorship was also lighter during this period. The drive towards the West was mirrored in better relations between socialist and capitalist countries, so called *Détente*, culminating in the Helsinki Accords in 1975. The multi-layered changes were reflected in the change of leadership of the Party: the aged, ascetic and conservative Władysław Gomułka was replaced in 1970 by a much younger, *liberal* and worldly Edward Gierek. Gierek previously worked as a miner in France and Belgium, where he was also active in the communist movement.

However, these pro-capitalist reforms were regarded as either insufficient or heading in the wrong direction. This is because rather than introducing any deeper technological and social changes, the authorities merely embarked on a programme of improving housing and the production of consumer goods, mostly to appease the discontented population. The drive towards consumption (condemned under Gomułka as a western malaise), was marked by increases in the private ownership of cars and country cottages. Consumption was in a large part financed by western credit. Its key source was the flood of dollars which poured from multi-billionaire OPEC states, distributed by the international banking system in the form of loans to anyone who wanted to borrow. For the socialist countries which succumbed to it, notably Poland and Hungary, loans seemed a providential way of simultaneously paying for investment and raising their people's standard of living [Hobsbawm 1995: 474].

The social reforms failed to create a more transparent and egalitarian public sphere or establish an efficient administration. Professional advancement at work was often linked to political loyalty. Such an attitude created a sense of unfairness and was regarded as a factor in the East lagging behind the West. However, dissatisfaction, at least among the intelligentsia, did not lead to revolt, but passive resistance, half-expressed and misplaced grudges, or adopting a *dual consciousness*, one at home and a different one in public. Such strategies allowed citizens to vent their frustrations without seriously risking their place in official life. "Real socialism" worked relatively well, as long as the standard of living was rising, which indeed happened in Poland in the first half of the 1970s. The conformist behaviour of Poles during this period confirms Václav Havel's reading of late communist societies as "post-totalitarian": "The post-totalitarian system has been built on foundations laid by the historical encounter between dictatorship and the consumer society" [Havel 1985: 38]. However, when the flood of dollars dried up,

the situation appeared even worse than before and political dissatisfaction grew, leading to the anti-establishment mass movement of Solidarity. My argument is that Wiszniewski engages with these various facets of the 1970s, including consumerism, as well as looking at Polish history from this particular vantage point.

Wiszniewski – work and history

Wojciech Wiszniewski was born in 1946 and died of a heart attack while working on his first full-length fiction film in 1981. The dates of his life are symbolic, the first signifies that he belongs fully to the post-war generation; the second that he experienced no other life than that under the system of state socialism. The dramatic period of the “first Solidarity” mostly eluded him. Wiszniewski’s short working life practically coincides with the 1970s; he made his first student’s etude in 1967 and his last film in 1978 and the majority of his films portray working-class people.

The director tends to look at the person’s work in the context of his or her entire life, but pays little attention to the intricacies of specific occupations. Either this aspect is not presented in his film at all or is reduced to conventional gestures associated with a specific job, such as polishing a piece of wood in *Stolarz* (“The Carpenter”, 1976) or presenting the worker against the background of the factory or his/her machine, as in *Opowieść o człowieku, który wykonał 552% normy* (“A Story of a Man Who Filled 552% of the Quota”, 1973) and *Wanda Gościńska, włóknianka* (“Wanda Gościńska, A Weaver”, 1975). In this way Wiszniewski suggests that what he was most interested was work in the context of politics and history, as opposed to processes of work. Such an impression is strengthened by the off-screen commentary, typically belonging to the protagonist who ponders on the changing historical circumstances of his/her work. The most important shift is from pre-war capitalist Poland to the Poland of state socialism. Inevitably, Wiszniewski engages with the ideologies of capitalism and socialism, and with the aesthetic traditions of representing work, most importantly socialist realism. For the purpose of this study, I will divide his films into those about exceptional workers, ordinary manual workers and the lumpenproletariat. Some of Wiszniewski’s films do not fit entirely one category, pointing to the fact that the artist is aware of a certain fluidity of the world of work. People can move from one category to the other when external circumstances change.

Wiszniewski’s films representing exceptional workers attracted more attention from Polish scholars than his remaining films and virtually all authors who discuss them render Wiszniewski as an ardent critic of Stalinism and socialism at large, who used his characters to mock this system [Przylipek 1984; Głowa 1996; Mąka-Malatyńska 2006; Śliwińska 2006]. Such an interpretation, which fits the wider

paradigm of an “author-lone hero against the oppressive state”, as mentioned earlier, is supported by the fact of “shelving” many of Wiszniewski’s films. However, without undermining Wiszniewski’s personal struggle with the authorities I propose to read his films as complex statements about the Polish Stalinist past and socialism at large, reflecting the ambiguity of the ideological positions of the bulk of the Polish intelligentsia in the 1970s, including that of the director himself.

The first film about an exceptional worker is “A Story of a Man Who Filled 552% of the Quota”, which apparently inspired the celebrated movie by Andrzej Wajda, *Człowiek z marmuru* (“Man of Marble”, 1977). The titular character, Bernard Bugdol, was a shock worker after the Second World War, especially in the years 1948–49. He broke records for extracting coal, when working in the mine with his brother. Rather than simply establishing what happened during the time of Bugdol’s greatest successes, Wiszniewski assesses the event from a (then) contemporary perspective, the 1970s. This is indicated by including in the film an introduction and a coda, which is set in the television studio, where a programme about Bugdol is being made, presumably the same programme we are currently watching. This framing points to the fact that Wiszniewski is interested not only in Bugdol’s real life, but also the play between his life and its media image, perhaps because, in a postmodern fashion, he does not believe in an unmediated reality.

The early shot shows an ordinary block like those where the majority of working class people lived in Poland and where presumably Bugdol dwelled during a large part of his life, although later we see him in his own house (which might be a summer dacha). For a moment he shoots Bugdol from the back and then edits it with the image of the back of a statue, one of a number adorning the Palace of Culture in Warsaw, which represents Bugdol or rather a generic shock worker, based on his image. This editing announces that the film will confront the real man with his monument. For the remainder of the film Wiszniewski offers us numerous official and unofficial representations of Bugdol, as if he attempted to account for different perspectives from which this type can be perceived and contextualised. Such a method brings to mind *Citizen Kane* (1941) by Orson Welles and the previously mentioned “Man of Marble”, both films expressing scepticism in the possibility of telling the truth, understood as a version which everybody will accept. The film thus seems critical of socialist realism and Hollywood cinema, which favour simple stories over ambiguous ones. We hear verses and songs devoted to shock workers, most importantly Wincenty Pstrowski, Bugdol’s better known predecessors, who introduced competition to the Polish factories after the Second World War. Wiszniewski also shows fragments of old newsreels and a kind of comic strip or a family album devoted to Bugdol’s achievements. These official representations are juxtaposed with members of his family and work mates musing

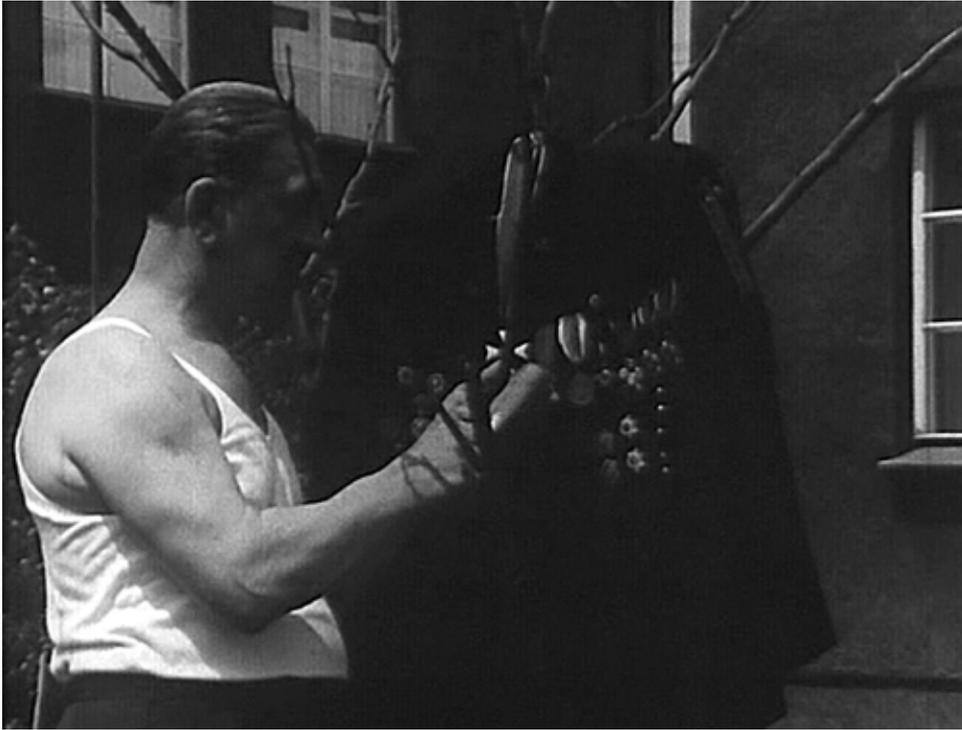
on his past, as well as his own responses to some questions referring to the value of his methods, presumably asked off screen. While in the official representations Bugdol's attitude to work is presented as an example for everybody to follow, in the memories of others we get his less flattering portrayal. Bugdol is subjected to two principal criticisms. Firstly, some claim that his successes had a negative effect on other workers because they undermined their achievements and led to an increase of their quotas. The shock worker thus made everybody else look mediocre. The second criticism comes from his wife who says that preoccupation with work made Bernard neglect his family and treat his wife with a sense of superiority. Bugdol responds to the first criticism that as a result of competition workers did not need to exert their muscles more than normal because the socialist competition was about working smarter rather than harder. He also adds that work quotas would have increased anyway due to progress in technology and the organisation of work, leading to gains in productivity. Ultimately, his pioneering work was meant to make people work less rather than more. Improvements in working methods were also necessary in the context of the backwardness of Polish industry in the late 1940s. Without the work, he pioneered Poland would lag behind forever. Instead, prosperity was achieved. Bugdol also mentions that at some stage he was touring mines and other enterprises to introduce socialist competition and his ideas were taken up in steelworks and textile mills, proving that they were effective.

Bugdol also achieved success in other spheres of public life. He was a director of two mines, an MP, and a chairman of one of the most successful Polish football clubs, *Górnik Zabrze*. He also received a university education, becoming an engineer. These successes are not mentioned in the film, which might suggest that Wiszniewski did not want to praise the socialist system too much. Bugdol's prosperity might also be seen as his partial response to his wife's criticism that the shock worker felt superior over her; he did so in the manner many men (and women), both in the East and in the West, feel superior over their spouses when they are extraordinarily successful. Moreover, we see Bugdol's family together, suggesting that any differences the couple had were put aside and the family remained intact. Ultimately it remained, if not a perfect, then at least a functioning family. Watching the film now I cannot help but think about another Polish family of an exceptional worker, as portrayed on screen: that of Lech Wałęsa in the recent film by Andrzej Wajda, *Wałęsa: Człowiek z nadziei* ("Wałęsa: Man of Hope", 2013). In this family we also encounter a wife begrudging her husband for putting first his work rather than his family and for being arrogant, but this is not a reason to leave him. If anything, such a situation reflects a patriarchal system affecting the way families functioned both in the East and in the West, under the condition of state socialism and capitalism.

“Work competition” and “shock working”¹ appear in the Marxist discourse on work, but not in the context of the ideal future system, that of communism, but its opposite: capitalism. In *Capital* Marx referred to workers forced to work so intensively and for such long hours that they appeared as if in a state of shock. This idea was developed in due course by Walter Benjamin who compared workers labouring in a factory to shell-shocked soldiers [Benjamin 2007: 176–78]. Their argument was that shock was needed by the workers to sustain the oppression of toil. In the Marxist discourse there is nothing positive about competition: it is an instrument of oppressing and fragmenting the working class, and in this way preventing the communist revolution. Not surprisingly, to square the realities of working under the conditions of state socialism with Marxist principles, the state ideologues had to argue that shock working is a special case of competition, very different from the capitalist model, as reflected by adding the word “socialist” to it. This is also the line adopted by Bugdol. He argues that socialist competition served the worker and the whole society, unlike its capitalist counterpart, which was a means to extract surplus value from the worker to enrich the capitalist. Moreover, Bugdol emphasises that shock working was merely a temporary measure; it was suitable to the period following wartime destruction, but not later periods, when the work of manual labourers was increasingly taken by what Marx terms “general intellect”. Bugdol’s professional successes and his prosperity act as confirmation that socialist competition led to the enrichment of the worker, unlike under capitalism, where the more the worker produces, the poorer and more alienated he is. One cannot find a better advertisement for state socialism as a system which rewards generously hard work.

And yet, as many authors notice, Bugdol’s face expresses discomfort or sadness, as if he had to defend his position rather than bask in his glory. However, this sadness does not mean either that Wiszniewski renders Bugdol’s life as wasted or that he presents him, as Głowa puts it, as “fossilised”, namely locked in the past and immune to new ideas [Głowa 1996: 212]. On the contrary, Bugdol strikes me as somebody with an acute sense of history and understanding of the character of work in a modern society. Rather his sadness results from his retirement and understanding that his successes were so spectacular that he would not be able to match them in the present; he can only re-live them, by polishing his awards, looking at old pictures or giving interviews to people like Wiszniewski. But who in

¹ In Polish language there is a term for “work competition” (*współzawodnictwo pracy*), but not for “shock work”. The shock worker in Polish is described as leader of work (*przodownik pracy*), most likely to avoid the negative connotations resulting from bringing together “shock” and “work”.



Bernard Bugdol polishing his medals in “A Story of a Man Who Filled 552% of the Quota”

their advanced age would not like to be in such a position? Watching the film now, when opportunities for social promotion diminished due to fierce competition for scarce jobs, Bugdol’s story comes across almost as a fairy tale.

The titular character of “Wanda Gościmińska, A Weaver” can be described as a female version of Bugdol. In common with the famous miner, Gościmińska was also a shock worker, whose achievements were showcased in communist propaganda. She was chosen as one of *Ludzie Trzydziestolecia* (“People of the 30 Years [of Socialist Poland]”): an exclusive club of those who contributed in an exceptional way to People’s Poland’s growth and prosperity.

The film begins with Gościmińska presenting in a voice-over the main facts about her life. We learn that she was born in Łódź, which in the nineteenth century was the cradle of Polish capitalism and by the same token a hub of the working-class movement, and her parents, who had five children, were both workers, with mother also labouring as a weaver. This description renders Gościmińska as a model worker. The fact that her self-presentation contains only essential facts, as opposed to any subjective information, suggests that Wiszniewski is interested

only in what is typical in Gościmińska's life and persona. However, this does not mean that, as Mąka-Malatyńska argues, Gościmińska in Wiszniewski's film comes across as "an artificial character, cut according to the socialist realist pattern" [Mąka-Malatyńska 2006: 112]. Rather, she was chosen by the director because she embodied a socialist realist ideal – there was no gap between her personal views and those promoted by the communist ideology. By the same token, there was a fit between her private and public persona. If she comes across as monumental, then Wiszniewski is as guilty of this "sin", as were the socialist realist artists, by opting not to make his film in a naturalist style, but shooting what Mirosław Przyłipiak describes as a "creative documentary" [1986].

"Wanda Gościmińska, A Weaver" is divided into several parts, which are numbered, suggesting that the weaver's life had a specific order, bringing to mind the stages of Christ's road to crucifixion. The idea that "Gościmińska" represents more than her own life is also conveyed by showing her at the beginning among several people of different professions, such as a miner, a farmer and an engineer, standing in monumental poses with their tools in their hands, reminiscent of Soviet political posters under Lenin and Stalin [on Soviet posters see Bonnell 1997]. We also see Gościmińska cutting a loaf of bread, which looks enormous due to using a low-angle shot, and tracking shots of hands in close-ups with dirty or broken fingernails. In the voice over the protagonist alludes to pre-war poverty, saying that her mother cut the bread into small pieces, because it had to suffice for the whole day, while the children wanted to eat it all at once. The hands and the bread stand for working life, which state socialism was meant both to edify and transcend by giving the workers something more than just daily bread.

One part of the film is devoted to the crisis of the early 1930s, which in Europe led to widespread poverty and finally to the Second World War. Visually this is signified by the image of a man chopping a table with an axe (so that the wood can be used as heating material), followed by a shot of a long line of people, queuing for unemployment benefit and one man with a table attached to his body with a sign "I will accept any work". Gościmińska informs us how hard it was to live during this period. The sounds of *International* ending this episode allude to the weaver's joining the communist movement. In a subsequent part entitled "Generations" Gościmińska appears among young people, dressed in white shirts with red ties, a sign of their belonging to the "socialist youth". The youngsters ask her various questions concerning her work and she replies in a calm, patient voice. However, the last question, what can they learn from her example, remains unanswered and instead we hear the noise of clapping hands, perhaps a reference to the fact that in socialist Poland difficult questions were not answered but drowned by exclamations and praises of the communist propaganda.

Wiszniewski's character describes the year 1945 as a year of liberation from a double yoke: that of Hitlerism and capitalism. Like Bugdol, she mentions that when Poland was destroyed, there was a lot of work to do and not enough people to do it. In such circumstances socialist competition was the best way to ensure that Poland was rebuilt and the vital needs of the population were met. There was great demand for textiles and the machines, left by capitalist owners, could not stand idle. For her, who used to beg for any paid work, being rewarded in proportion for her effort constituted great opportunity, which she could not turn down. She says that "somebody has to be first", which most likely means not just the first to work, but also work in a new, more productive way, in her case working on more machines.

In due course Gościmińska is shown at home, sitting at a table surrounded by her relatives and friends, most likely celebrating her success as a "Woman of 30 Years" with food and alcohol. The background to this reception is old newsreels, showing workers engaged in rebuilding the country. The food looks very appealing and everybody enjoys their meal, which gives the impression that in socialist Poland hard work pays well – it leads to an abundance of material goods and joy. Only Gościmińska does not eat, but this is not because she slights the food, but because she is represented as being somewhat above such earthly pleasures, like a goddess placed among ordinary mortals. That Gościmińska is a super-heroine, a towering figure, is confirmed in the part, when we see her again among representatives of different professions, standing still at the two sides of a long hall, most likely in the Palace of Culture, with their tools in their hands, again in a way typical of Soviet posters. They represent those who in 1949 were rewarded by the state with a special medal, commemorating their contribution to building socialism in Poland. The camera is moving slowly between them to reach Gościmińska in the end. She is placed at the top of this assembly, as if she was the most important person among them, perhaps because she is the only woman in this male-dominated society, reflecting the marginalisation of women under state socialism, despite the rhetoric of gender equality. The weaver mentions that her professional achievements made her study and act politically, a fact reflected in her receiving a managerial position, although not as high as that of Bugdol, again reflecting the gender bias in socialist Poland, as elsewhere in the Eastern bloc.

Although the film begins with the image of work-worn hands, suggesting that heavy work leaves a deep scar on the worker, Wiszniewski's heroine does not come across as destroyed by work, but beautified by it. Her clothes are discreetly elegant, emphasising her shapely figure and she wears high heels, more like a professional woman than an ordinary weaver, not least because she became a professional woman thanks to her high achievements as a shock worker. Her face is also more

attractive than her official portrait on a banner, on which her features look coarse, most likely to reflect the fact that in socialist realist art workers were meant to look simple and depersonalised. The overall impression is that in her case socialist work paid well, not only in material terms, but also because it allowed her to become a self-confident woman with a distinctive personality and her own place in Polish history. All in all, Gościmińska's story can be seen as a socialist version of the "from shoeshine to millionaire" narrative.

However, "Wanda Gościmińska, A Weaver" suggests that Gościmińska's case belongs to the past, even more so than Bugdol's who in the film has to face questions about the value of his work methods for contemporary people. This impression is conveyed by the previously mentioned techniques of monumentalisation, such as shooting the protagonist from below, which renders her colossal and in static poses, as if frozen in time, and using close-ups. Mary Ann Doane argues that the close-up conveys a desire "to stop the film, to grab hold of something that can be taken away, to transfer the relentless temporality of the narrative's unfolding to a more manageable temporality of contemplation" [Doane 2003: 97]. The close-ups applied by Wiszniewski suggest that we should watch her closely; in the same way we tend to read history books, trying to draw lessons from the past. Another means which locates Gościmińska in the heroic past is the use of an almost monochromatic image. It appears that the whole film is shot in black and white with the exceptions of patches of red, for example, on a banner carried by the workers. As is well known, red is the colour of communism; it was extensively used on communist posters and in the most famous film about the proletariat struggle, Sergei Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Potemkin* ("Battleship Potemkin", 1925). Victoria Bonnell notes that colour symbolism in Soviet political posters resonated with religious art; the colour red served in religious icons to identify the sacred [Bonnell 1997: 32]. In my opinion, Wiszniewski shows awareness of this symbolism; for the communists like Gościmińska a red banner is like the cross for Christians.

The techniques of monumentalisation and even sacralisation, in which Wiszniewski indulges, do not mean, as Mąka-Malatyńska claims, that Wiszniewski mocks socialist realism and by the same token Stalinism, but merely that he recognises that this period belongs to the past. Moreover, the fact that he uses these techniques, only exaggerating them, rather than offering us a distinctly different view on Gościmińska's life, suggests that, like a model postmodernist, he is unable or unwilling to move beyond what his predecessors (artists representing socialist realism) created. His response to socialist realist "lies" about the shock workers, is not to offer us a competing narrative about them (which would be the case in Wajda's "Man of Marble"), but merely exaggerating the salient features of this narrative, as in the case of paying homage to earlier works.

The principal character of *...Szttygar na zagrodzie...* ("Foreman on a Farm", 1978), Stanisław Mazur, is not a shock worker, who exceeds the prescribed quota, but somebody who thanks to his successes as a miner embarks on the task of helping an ailing farming community which he left a long time ago, most likely to pursue a more attractive career in the coal industry. The story has a distinct beginning and end, 7 May 1976 and 11 November 1977, the dates when the protagonist and his family arrived at and left a village in the South of Poland named Rydułty Nowe. It is suggested that the miner came there not of his own accord, but in response to a request from the political authorities. On his arrival he found his own house in ruins and embarked on bringing prosperity back to "his" people, by producing sausages. He succeeded, as represented in a stylised shot showing the miner and his family wreathed in rings of sausage in a pose which some critics compared to a Laokoon group. Such an image suggests that the miner-cum-farmer's achievement was greater than life, not unlike the triumphs of Greek heroes.

However, as with Bugdol, we learn that Mazur's efforts were not appreciated by everybody. Some villagers treated the newcomers with hostility, of which the clearest sign was burning his car. It appears that the countrymen begrudged him because his success rendered them failing, and he made them work hard. The film lays bare two shortcomings, which in the 1970s were perceived as Polish cardinal sins: laziness and spite, to which the director also referred, although in a less conspicuous way, in his films about Bugdol and Gościmińska. If the film is critical about the socialist way of work, this is not because the shock workers failed, but rather because the rest of the society failed, not being able to live up to the socialist ideals, behaving more like a disruptive and reactionary lumpenproletariat, as described by Marx in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" [Marx 1978]. I will argue that in his condemnation of the people from Rydułty Wiszniewski also reveals a typical prejudice of the Polish intelligentsia towards people from the countryside.

Mirosław Przyłipiak argues that the story of a foreman can be interpreted as an allegory of Edward Gierek's career. Gierek, who became leader of the Party in the early 1970s, worked in his youth as an ordinary miner in France and Belgium, before he returned to Poland [Przyłipiak]. He became the new Secretary in response to an invitation by the Party's executive, which needed a new man able to modernise the country. The modernisation ended very sour with Solidarity's attempt to take over power in the early 1980s and Gierek losing his position. After the fall of state socialism the prevailing opinion has been that Gierek's reforms were a failure, because he squandered western credits and did not go far enough in turning Poland into a capitalist state. However, a significant proportion of Poles look in nostalgia at his decade, believing that Gierek's was the last attempt to

improve socialism from within. If not for unfavourable external circumstances and his countrymen's refusal to collaborate with the Party leader, he would succeed in achieving universal prosperity. If we accept such an allegorical reading of "Foreman on a Farm", then we can argue that Wiszniewski anticipated Gierek's demise and suggested that this would not be due to the leader's incompetence, but rather to the failure of ordinary people to give him a helping hand. However, as with the films about Gościmińska and Bugdol, the prevailing opinion is that the monumentalising gestures signify the director's critical attitude to his characters and the entire past in which they operated [Śliwińska 2006; Przyłipiak], rather than fascination with this period and admiration for their protagonists.

Stolarz ("Carpenter", 1976), similarly to *Wanda Gościmińska*, is told in the first person by a man who remembers working conditions in pre-war and war-torn Poland. However, on this occasion the main character is an ordinary worker, nonetheless proud of his achievements. The carpenter does not contrast the bad old days of capitalist exploitation with the good days of socialist competition, but points to the continuity between different periods of Polish history, based on the fact that irrespective of the political regime, people always need carpenter's skills. He mentions that at the beginning of the war he made cupboards where people could hide their belongings so they did not get confiscated, and at the end, following the unsuccessful Warsaw uprising, coffins for the dead insurrectionists. The only exception from the rule that a "carpenter always finds work" is the period of Stalinist rule, when the protagonist was forced to close down his workshop because it was a private business. At the time he found employment as a janitor. Moreover, the film does not finish by praising the socialist regime, but with the accusation of having a very small apartment despite working hard all his life. Hence, in contrast to the film about Bugdol, which pronounced the match between a person's work and his achievement, in "Carpenter" we get a sense of mismatch. Comparing the success stories of Bugdol and Gościmińska with the rather sour tale of the carpenter suggests that the communist regime over-rewarded exceptional workers at the expense of the ordinary ones, not unlike capitalism, which uses it as a measure to encourage entrepreneurship. Such criticism was frequently expressed in post-war Poland, as a claim that Poland was not really a "workers' country" because ordinary workers did not matter there.

The off-screen narrative of the carpenter is accompanied by two types of images and sounds. One shows a carpenter (whom we can identify as the protagonist) working with wood, mainly cutting a board with the saw. He is shown from a low angle, in a way which obscures most of his body, showing only his face and his hands. Often the camera is positioned in such a way that it appears that he is

making love. Similarly, the moaning sound produced by the saw cutting the wood can be mistaken for the sounds of ecstasy. If this was a conscious decision on the part of Wiszniewski, then the most likely idea behind such representation is to show that for a skilful and devoted worker the rhythm of work is like the rhythm of love. The fact that we always see the carpenter doing the same thing, while his story moves through time, adds to the impression that in reality his work remained the same, only its external circumstances changed. The image of the carpenter is juxtaposed with that of archival footage showing important events from the history of Poland and Europe. An excerpt showing a boy carrying pieces of wood through Warsaw before or during the Second World War or of Hitler greeting guests in his Bavarian villa, is repeated many times. In the opinion of Przyłipiak, the repetitions undermine the reliability of the film we are watching, warning us not to believe in the “supposedly” documentary images [Przyłipiak]. But such repetition might also suggest that the past is always present; we cannot detach ourselves from the past because it affects our chance of success in the present. Such an impression is also conveyed by low-angle shots, presenting the character enclosed by tall apartment blocks. It appears that although he works in an open space, in reality his margin of manoeuvre is small. Unlike Gościmińska, who transcended her position and metaphorically and literally left the factory, the carpenter remained bound to his tools and his class position. The voice-over belongs to Jan Himilbach, the best-known Polish “natural” (non-professional) actor. Himilbach, who was a mason, is remembered for his roles in many Polish cult films, including *Rejs* (“Cruise”, 1970) by Marek Piwowski. Using Himilbach in this role might suggest that the story presented in “Carpenter” is a typical fate of a Polish worker, unable to transcend his class. Such an idea is also conveyed by ending the film with the information that he lives in a tiny apartment. “Carpenter” is shot in black and white with only patches of red, the ultimate colour of communism. Predictably, we see a red flag hanging from the window of the apartment block where the carpenter lives. On this occasion, however, the red does not signify the triumph of socialist ideas, but plays an ironic function, pointing to the disparity between the ideals preached by the state and the reality of ordinary people’s lives.

31 kwietnia – 1 maja (31 April – 1 May”, 1970) opens with images of a run-down tenement block, suggesting a social milieu of the lowest rung of the working-class or the lumpenproletariat. The main character, a man in his twenties, lives there with his parents and a younger brother, which was a typical situation of adult children in post-war Poland. We see him when he leaves the house, either to go to work or to meet his drinking companions. The latter is suggested by a scene of him drinking beer near a kiosk, with other working-class men and women, an activity which in Poland of state socialism signified belonging to a lower stratum

of the working class, most importantly those without a regular job. Before that, on the staircase of his block, the young man meets a musician playing a mandolin and singing in the style of pre-war urban folklore. In this way Wiszniewski points to the continuity between the working-class tradition from the period before the war to the 1970s. It is worth adding that after the war this tradition was treated with suspicion, as it did not fit communal values, but rather attachment to individualism, such as being smart and cheating on others. However, the protagonist and his comrades subscribe to this (at the time of making the film) outdated idea full-heartedly. They all discuss some shabby deals, possibly stealing something or trading counterfeit goods. Near the end of the film the protagonist reveals that his ultimate goal is to have a car, a large house in the city or in the suburbs, lots of money and *not* to work. He does not mention any non-selfish goods such as strengthening socialism or serving his country; for Wiszniewski's character they belong to history's scrap heap. The idea that everything that matters in life are material goods, is juxtaposed with the motif of the special role of work and the working class in Polish post-war society. The protagonist himself says that he belongs to the working class because his mother and father are both workers and he is proud of his class background. Such a declaration, is, however, clouded in irony by the way it is presented, as if the character does not say it with his own words but repeats slogans learnt from the newspapers. Wiszniewski further undermines his sincerity by juxtaposing his speech about one's "fight to be working class", with images of the street fight of most likely drunken men or hooligans. The official discourse is also reflected in images of the May Day Celebration. Several times Wiszniewski shows a well-preserved Art Nouveau building on Piotrkowska, the main street of Lodz, decorated with banners and masses of people walking there with banners. We gather that the protagonist is among them, but not as a participant, but somebody in the crowd either because this is expected of him (participating in May Day celebrations was mandatory in Eastern European countries) or because he likes when "something happens".

The overall impression from this film is that in the 1970s Poland the working people led a double life: official and unofficial, and there was a huge gap between these lives, a statement supported both by common knowledge and sociological research [Świda-Ziemia 1998]. Both lives were inauthentic because the official life disrespected people's endeavour for material goods and a desire to express their individualism and the unofficial life was devoid of higher values and tainted by hypocrisy. This lack of authenticity is underlined by the ironic title of the film. 31 April does not exist in real calendars – it is a nowhere land suspended between the ordinary 30th of April and extraordinary 1st of May. Using such a title might also be a hint to the viewer that the director, due to censorship constraints, was

unable to represent either the official or unofficial life truthfully; he had to put both of them in some kind of brackets.

The background to the life of the main character are fragments of television programmes. Wiszniewski includes three such examples, each suggesting a specific narrative which is meant to fill Poles with pride. The first is a popular Polish series about the Second World War, *Czterej pancerni i pies* (“Four Tankmen and a Dog”, 1966–70), about Poles winning the war thanks to collaboration with their Soviet ally. The second is a fragment of a football match, in which the Polish team is winning. It is presented by a charismatic sports reporter, Jan Ciszewski, known for his ability to amplify Polish successes. Finally, there is an excerpt from newsreels devoted to western hippies, who travel to India in search of spiritual enlightenment. The Polish commentary declares that these people obey no moral norms or goals, and their journey will be in vain. Implicitly, this assessment suggests that in Poland or the socialist world at large, people’s lives are saturated with higher values. Judging by the life of Wiszniewski’s protagonist, this is not the case; it is the life of his “socialist” protagonist which comes across as trite.

Conclusion

In this essay I considered the films of Wojciech Wiszniewski as representations of the situation and mind-set of Polish workers in different periods of Polish history, the times of Stalinist rule, which coincided with the period of rebuilding Poland after the destruction of war and the 1970s, a time of “soft” version of state socialism, when Poland undertook a rapid, even if unsuccessful modernisation. I also considered these films as expressing a particular position in relation to the values informing work in different periods of Poland’s history. What transpires in his films is that work as discussed in their films is almost always seen by the protagonists as something more than economic activity, as it is seen in capitalism – a means to gain social recognition, transform one’s country, even achieve metaphysical fulfilment. In this way the films, perhaps against their intention, validate state socialism as a system which offered more than just “daily bread”.

Wiszniewski’s films also point to the capacity of documentary cinema to do more than document the past or the present, namely to participate in ideological debate, thanks to their strong authorial stamp. Wiszniewski’s self-referentiality, as conveyed especially in “A Story of a Man Who Filled 552% of the Quota”, is nowadays taken for granted, as it is a staple diet of documentary films. However, in the 1970s he was at the forefront of what can be termed a postmodern turn in documentary cinema, not only in Poland, but in Europe at large.

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