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Gender Discourse in Eastern European SF Cinema

The body of literature on gender discourse and sexuality in sf cinema is growing constantly (Kuhn; Penley et al.; Melzer, Alien; Pearson et al.; Sharp; Conrad; Janes). This is not surprising as genre and gender are often discussed together. Science fiction is also a means to explore the similarities and boundaries between men and women, because in alien zones and future worlds sex differences are often obliterated, blurred, or contested; men and women are replaced with or accompanied by androids and robots. The vast majority of existing gender studies of sf, however, concern Western films. Equally, the studies of Soviet, Russian, and Eastern European sf cinema tend to neglect its gender aspect, focusing on the relation between the reality represented in the films and external reality, typically regarding the films as either a means to condemn the enemy state (Pospíšil 2008) or criticize one’s own country (Mazierska).

This essay fills the gap in gender studies of Eastern European sf film by discussing the representation of men and women in The End of August at the Hotel Ozone [Konec srpna v hotelu Ozón, aka Late August at the Hotel Ozone, hereafter Hotel Ozone] (1967), directed by Jan Schmidt, and Sex Mission [Seksmisja] (1983), directed by Juliusz Machulski. We bring them together because they both portray post-apocalyptic futures in which men are almost absent and women take center stage. We want to explore what, in the view of the films’s authors, happens to women and the world at large when they are deprived of male company. Equally significant, however, are the differences between the films. They are directed, respectively, by Czech and Polish directors and were made in different periods of the postwar history of their countries. Hotel Ozone is part of the Czech New Wave (1963-68), regarded as the highest point in Czech postwar film history (Lovejoy, “Military” 430). It coincided with and was affected by political and cultural liberalization in Czechoslovakia, leading to the Prague Spring of 1968, an attempt to create a more democratic version of socialism. The Czech New Wave was marked by broaching subjects previously omitted, most importantly the struggle to achieve personal self-fulfillment in socialist reality, and by stylistic experimentation, such as mixing documentary with fiction and live action with animation (see Hames). Sex Mission belongs to Polish cinema in the period of post-martial law, when an attempt to overcome the political order by the Solidarity movement was thwarted, albeit temporarily. This period is marked by an upsurge of genre films, often with a high dose of eroticism or even sexual violence, interpreted either as a means to shift the audience’s attention from political conflicts or to articulate these conflicts using sex and violence as metaphors for the status quo. The drive toward genre cinema should also
be viewed in the context of an attempt to reform Polish cinema by making it more commercial. This attitude helped Machulski’s career; in the 1980s he became the youngest head of a film studio (Zebra) and enjoyed considerable financial and creative freedom. This is reflected both in the relatively high production values of his films and the relative boldness with which he treats political issues, as testified by *Sex Mission* and *Kingsajz [King Size]* (1987), his other fantasy film from the 1980s.

These two films also have different emotional tones; the Czech film is regarded as a serious work, the Polish one as comedy. *Hotel Ozone* was shot in black and white, *Sex Mission* in color. They have different statuses within their respective national cinemas. *Hotel Ozone* is regarded as an arthouse work that never reached a mainstream audience and, was, despite being one of the finest examples of Czechoslovak New Wave, overshadowed by other contemporary films. Today it is known only to hardcore fans of Czech or sf cinema, although recent publications on this film by Alice Lovejoy, placing it in the context of the Czech military avant-garde, may lead to increased attention. *Sex Mission* is one of the most commercially successful films ever made in the Eastern bloc, reaching an audience of over eleven million people in Poland, making it the most popular Polish comedy of all time (Zalesiński 2009); in the Soviet Union over twenty million cinema-goers saw the film upon its release.

Importantly, the two productions stand out for taking issue with the relations between men and women and for portraying blurred sexual/gender identities that diverge from the heterosexual norm. Our readings are thus informed by feminist theory, or more exactly its application to Eastern European cinema, and queer theory, especially Judith Butler’s groundbreaking work juxtaposing these gendered and sexed representations with the dominant discourse of heteropatriarchy, understood as “an overarching system of male dominance through the institution of compulsory heterosexuality” that “ensures male right of access to women [and] … includes the invisibility of lesbians” (Yep 31); it is “men dominating and de-skilling women in any of a number of forms, and women devaluing (of necessity) female bonding” (Code 245). We are interested in the ways these images either confirm or undermine heteropatriarchy, as well as in how their perspectives on gender-related issues interact with various sociopolitical stances (e.g., critiques of communist rule, values of nation state, etc.).

We are also reading *Hotel Ozone* and *Sex Mission* as metaphors of colonial situations. Such an interpretation is not unusual among authors discussing sf cinema and literature, both in the West (Rieder) and in the East (McGuire; Wróbel; Näripea). Especially inspiring is an observation made by John Rieder that post-apocalyptic narratives tend to represent colonization of a superior race or country by one perceived as being on a lower level of civilization, for example England being colonized by invaders from Wales and Ireland in *After London* (1885) by Richard Jefferies. Accordingly, post-apocalyptic sf offers a story of revenge or, as Rieder puts it, of “the mighty humbled” (125). As
we will argue in due course, the mighty are also humbled in Schmidt’s and Machulski’s films, but here the revenge discourse does not fit a simple pattern. In our interpretation, the characters play more than one metaphorical function. In particular, women stand for the Soviet occupiers, as well as for Czech and Polish women under communist rule.

**Queerness, post-apocalypse, and sf in the West and East.** While many of the central works of queer theory concentrate on “homosexual and homoerotic social practices,” on texts created by non-heterosexual authors or read by “queer” audiences, our concern here is primarily with the potential of this frame for problematizing “the complex social forces of heteropatriarchy, the linked systems enforcing heterosexuality, and patriarchal gender asymmetry” (Geller 10; see also Pearson et al. 4). For our explorations, the understanding emphasized by many queer theorists—that sex is political (see Rubin)—is especially pertinent, since the visual culture of the former Eastern bloc has been consistently interpreted as abundant with political tensions. In this respect it is also appropriate to recall Donna Haraway’s famous statement that science fiction is political theory.

According to Mark Bould, “Sf was long imagined sexless” (387). There seems to be little agreement in matters concerning the relations between sf as a literary or cinematic genre as pertains to queer theory and representations of sexuality. On the one hand, some authors argue that sf and queer theory share significant common ground in questioning and denaturalizing certain master narratives (Pearson 4) and “contesting social norms” (Foster 391), including those pertaining to gender and sexuality. On the other hand, there is also the understanding that sf often reproduces the social norms of its time (Elkins) and that many sf texts are “completely unselfconscious in their reproduction of the heteronormative environment in which they are written” (Pearson 18; see also Hollinger 24). Moreover, sf texts can present “queer” content, while remaining within the framework of white male heterosexuality and the binary categories it entails (Melzer “Coming” 397). In short, then, recognizing the existence of queer motifs in a specific film is a matter of discourse, rather than of simply identifying the intention of a film’s author. Furthermore, apparent “queerness” might coincide with varied ideological positions, anti- or pro-women, right- or left-wing.

After the Second World War post-apocalyptic sf literature and cinema flourished most in the US, the manufacturer and user of the atomic bomb, and in Japan, which suffered its consequences (Brosnan; Shapiro). Yet, it also proved popular in the socialist world (McGuire; Jameson; Wróbel; Mazierska; Pospíšil; Majmurek; Hauser). In both Western and Eastern cinema, dystopian future worlds were frequently presented as places in which reproduction ceased or sex as a means of reproduction became obsolete. Several authors link the worldwide popularity of post-apocalyptic sf, as well as its use of a specific vocabulary, to its roots in the Christian apocalyptic tradition. As John Rieder observes, however, while such explanations account for the recurrence and repetition of stories of disaster, they also tend to cast the fiction’s specific
allusions to the political and economic realities of the day as merely the passing occasions for such repetition (123). Identifying these specific allusions is of greater importance for us than proving that the chosen films adhere to a Christian master-model of apocalypse and its aftermath.

The post-apocalyptic world also serves to criticize the political status quo, either abroad or in one’s own country. It could be used as an indictment of Western powers, which were ahead of the socialist East in developing nuclear technologies. More often, it provides a convenient metaphor of communist reality, rendering it as dystopian, bare, and regressive, contrary to the propaganda of the communist authorities that presented the communist system as ahead of its capitalist competitors. Post-apocalyptic sf thus fulfilled the need for artists to vent their frustration about the disappointments of living under communism without taking the same risk as those who created realistic literature or cinema. This was precisely because the criticism was not direct, but available only to those able and willing to see the represented world as a metaphor. That said, sf offering critique, however veiled, of the situation in one’s own country and the Soviet bloc at large was very rare during Stalinism. Instead, this genre flourished during the periods of political thaw, when censorship eased, facilitating “accurate reflection[s] of the ‘worst of all possible worlds’ experienced as a historical reality” (Gottlieb 17; see also Simon 387ff; Greene 106; Howell 133). This is the case with Hotel Ozone, made during the Czech New Wave. Another sign of its relationship to a thaw is that it was produced by the Czech Army Studio, belonging to the Ministry of National Defense. We can assume that only in the periods of liberalization were the political authorities and especially the army able to overcome their usual distrust of “high art.” Although, according to Schmidt, the Ministry officials were not too happy about financing a film about the hypothetical third world war, after some persuasion the production went ahead and the director made the film the way he wanted (Schmidt, qtd. Holub 6). Sex Mission was made in the 1980s, which in Poland was a decade of political chaos, loss of power on the part of communist authorities and, as already mentioned, commercialization of cinema. Unlike in Czechoslovakia during the “normalization” of the 1970s and 1980s, in Poland during this period cultural censorship did not tighten. On the other hand, such a situation was also conducive to making genre films, even if they did not adhere to communist ideology.

Hotel Ozone. Although directed by Jan Schmidt, Hotel Ozone is better known as the work of its scriptwriter Pavel Jurácek (Hames 146-47). This is because before making this film Schmidt directed only four shorts, including two in collaboration with Jurácek. By contrast, by the time Hotel Ozone was made, Jurácek had gained a reputation as one of the most distinguished scriptwriters and directors of the Czech New Wave. In his portfolio was a script for an sf film Ikarie XB 1 (1963, released in the US in an altered version as Voyage to the End of the Universe), directed by Jindřich Polák; script and direction of Every Young Man [Každý mladý muž] (1965); and scripts for two films by
Věra Chytilová, *Ceiling [Strop]* (1962) and *Daisies [Sedmíkrásky]* (1966). Jurácek portrays male-female relationships as marked by distrust, even contempt, although skepticism often masks fascination, which is conveyed by a motif of voyeurism in *Every Young Man* and *Daisies.* Jurácek’s men regard women as purely sexual creatures, without individuality and intellect, and, conversely, his women regard men as primitive beings who have no desires except sexual ones (Hanáková “Space” 67). The perception of women as devoid of psychology in *Every Young Man* is signaled by casting the same actress, Hana Ružicková, in the roles of all female characters and using the same name, Maria, for both characters in *Daisies.* Also, both *Daisies* and *Hotel Ozone* evoke nuclear disaster. In *Daisies* documentary footage of nuclear explosions is woven into the main action, which presents two young women wreaking havoc everywhere they appear. The idea suggested by such juxtaposition is that global disaster, caused by men, is mirrored by mayhem on the local scale, enjoyed and perpetuated by women. Seen more positively, the disruption and chaos created by the two Marias can be regarded as a way for women to draw attention to and protest against the careless and vicious actions of male politicians.

*Hotel Ozone* shares some of its characteristics with Jurácek’s earlier films. It is set in an unspecified location, twenty-something years after a nuclear catastrophe that destroyed human civilization, polluted Earth’s natural resources, and wiped out almost its entire population in an epidemic of leukemia. The survivors consist of eight young women and one old woman, Dagmar Hustolesová, who is their leader and guide. Rambling on horses through a bare landscape, the group is in constant search of canned food, fuel, and other, especially male, survivors. The lack of access to culture and the long and harsh journey render the young women primitive and cruel. They kill animals, mostly for pleasure, as well as for food, including a friendly dog (in a graphic scene, which attracted much attention from viewers, as demonstrated by comments on the IMDb website) and even the horses that provide transport, and they pay little attention to anything that does not fulfill their immediate need for nutrition and warmth. There is also little warmth in their mutual relationships; instead they compete with each other for the limited resources and punish those who show weakness, as demonstrated, for example, in a scene where one of the girls shrieks with horror at the sight of a snake, prompting one of the other “Amazons” to decapitate the snake and throw its body at her faint-hearted companion. Their communication is limited to exchanging information about practicalities and their language is as barren as the landscape they traverse. At one point, one of them reads aloud a love letter they have found in a ghostly abandoned building. She utters the words with apparent difficulty, unable to identify with the emotions it conveys, signaling her lack of cultural sophistication and human intimacy. Furthermore, the girls do not even call their leader by any name that would grant her individuality, but refer to her as “the old one.” The young women have no memory of the pre-nuclear past. Their only conduit to history is the old
woman. She shows her companions, pointing to the rings on the tree, when they were born and when their male relatives died. Unlike the young wanderers, the old woman is mild-mannered—a consequence of her remembering the times of prosperity and culture.

The difference between the young ramblers and their old leader is thrown into sharp relief in the second part of the film, when the group encounters an old man called Otakar Herold, a relic of the pre-nuclear past. The house he inhabits is called Hotel Ozone, presumably because it used to serve as a hotel or sanatorium in a region famous for good air. Now, however, the name is an ironic reminder of a history that took a wrong turn. Similarly, the house and its surroundings signify the cultural heritage destroyed by the nuclear catastrophe, with a gramophone, chessboard, pictures on the wall, TV set, and old newspapers in Otakar’s home, and a derelict church nearby. Otakar, like Dagmar, seems cultured and well mannered. He addresses Dagmar as “Mrs. Hustolesová,” and when she falls ill, takes her temperature, prepares grog for her, and brings her flowers. Meanwhile, the girls show little respect for the belongings, wisdom, and life of the old man, openly treating him with mistrust and jealousy. Later, Otakar prepares for his visitors a lavish supper, with candles, real coffee, and elegantly served food, yet the dining rituals and the language used by the old couple remain incomprehensible to their young companions. One of them spits out the coffee and they all make a mess at the table. The meal turns out to be Dagmar and Otakar’s last supper; after glasses are raised for what the older generation believes to be a new beginning of humankind, Dagmar suddenly dies. Following her funeral, the girls prepare to continue their journey, despite Otakar’s urging them to stay, and demand that Otakar give them the old wind-up gramophone. When he refuses, the girls chase and attack him and finally one of them shoots him dead. The outcome of their journey remains unknown.

According to Petra Hanáková, “When watching a New Wave film, we immediately become aware of the heightened presence of and the emphasis on the body, its needs and deeds, but also of the body pictured as a site of possible control and exploitation. More than anything else, Czechoslovak New Wave cinema is the cinema of the human form” (“From Maříka” 154). Of particular importance to our reading of Hotel Ozone is Hanáková’s observation that the body very often becomes “a site of possible assault, control and exploitation” (155). Interestingly, however, while she refers primarily to female bodies that are “focalizations and embodiments of male fantasies,” as well as “the easy targets of male aggression, exploitation and abuse” (155), in Hotel Ozone, at first sight, the eight “Amazons” are, on the contrary, the aggressors, and the objects of their assaults are animals and men. Indeed, the explicit violence towards animals is undoubtedly the most disturbing and memorable aspect of the film, and a clearly discernible connection is made between torturing and slaughtering animals and the point-blank execution of Otakar, the only surviving man. With the exception of more-civilized Dagmar, the women seem perplexing, unnatural, and inhuman.
Somewhat paradoxically, however, we would like to argue that this representation, even though demonstrating the demise of the male gender, is in fact deeply about masculine aggression and control of female bodies. A closer look at the apparent gender imbalance reveals a contradiction in the narrative indicated most importantly in the countdown at the beginning of the film, read by male voices in English, Russian, Chinese, and French, which suggests that the global catastrophe was caused in the first place by masculine ambition, male militancy, and male recklessness. The subsequent epidemic of leukemia proved to be more rapidly lethal to men than to women, thus resulting in the self-destruction of the patriarchal order. Yet it is also significant that the film shows that this did not mean emancipation and empowerment for women, but led instead to a complete collapse of civilization. Women might be physically more durable than men, but Hotel Ozone also makes it clear that they are deteriorating mentally and intellectually without their male “better halves.” While they have lost traditionally feminine manners and acquired others conventionally related to masculinity, they are defined not as heroes but as savages precisely from a patriarchal and heteronormative point of view that prescribes the role of nomadic hunter to men and that of gentle and subservient homemaker to women. Even if the girls’ excessive violence draws attention to the culturally constructed norms and prejudices about “proper” gendered behavior and attributes, the film presents it as an undesirable deviation from the heteropatriarchal norm. This reading is sustained by the unmistakably positive representation of Dagmar and Otakar’s courteous relationship, as well as by the older generation’s desire to facilitate natural reproduction. Moreover, the images of butch women, as testified by the reactions of male commentators, still function to serve male erotic fantasies (see Pospíšil 142). Another patriarchal binary at work here is that of culture versus nature: the girls are linked with nature, its uncontrollable wildness, unpredictability, and random brutality, but also its barrenness and pollution in the aftermath of the nuclear disaster; the old man and his home at the Hotel Ozone stand for culture and the long-lost values of enlightenment. Ultimately, the film suggests that there is no future outside the heterosexual matrix.

As stated by Tomáš Pospíšil, as well as by Jan Schmidt himself, Hotel Ozone was not meant to be political in the sense of criticizing socialism or capitalism, then competing for world hegemony. Rather it was conceived as a humanist warning against nuclear war, which at the time of its production was regarded as a distinct possibility (Pospíšil 145-46; Schmidt, qtd. Holub 8). As Schmidt puts it, “The film was not looked very much as science-fiction [sic]. At the time the destruction of the world did not appear to us too sci-fi because it all seemed very close. It was the bitter reality” (Schmidt, qtd. Holub 8). The limited setting also served to create a realistic effect. In our view, however, like the vast majority of sf produced in the socialist East and especially Czechoslovakia (Hauser), and in common with many films belonging to the Czech New Wave, it can also be regarded as an example of
“soft dissidence.” Its graphic violence, chilling sense of isolation, and grim outlook anticipate the cataclysmic events of 1968 and the dominant mindset of the subsequent years of normalization. In addition, the twenty-something years that have passed since the nuclear catastrophe to which the old woman refers can be compared to the twenty-something years between the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia and the making of the film. The film’s setting encourages such a reading. The landscape presented in the film was not invented; it uses Czechoslovak military zones, in the Šumava region near the border with West Germany, which constitutes one of the most picturesque corners of Czechoslovakia. Equally, this location was infamous for many attempts by Czechs to flee from there to West Germany, as shown, for example, in Král Šumavy (1959), directed by Karel Kachyňa. As Schmidt said, in that area “many villages had been destroyed and [there were] houses that were overgrown with grass and ruined churches” (Schmidt, qtd. Holub 6; see also Lovejoy, Army 195-96). Their destruction can be seen as a measure of the efforts taken by the communist authorities in Czechoslovakia to prevent citizens from fleeing to the West and, in a wider sense, to maintain a distance between communism and capitalism.

Similarly, the extinct culture to which the film alludes, and which it valorizes, is not a culture of the type glorified in socialist discourses, but one condemned by them. It includes Christianity, as conveyed by an empty and partly destroyed church and the supper prepared by an old man, stylized as the biblical last supper and followed by the betrayal and murder of the “last man.” Czech prewar culture (which survives only in a residual form after 1945) is also evoked, suggested by the old man’s gallantry, the décor of his house, and his old-fashioned gramophone. It should be mentioned that this valorization of the interwar period was not unusual for movies made by Army Film at the time (Lovejoy, “Surplus” 9) and it could be seen as a testimony to the films made during the political thaw.

The young women, as represented by Schmidt, are not only the victims of the catastrophe which destroyed all these cultural treasures and their creators. They add to the destruction by vandalizing the church, showing disrespect to Christian rituals, disappointing their leader, and finally killing the old man. While the man and the old woman are thus marked as Christian, Western, cultured, articulate, and possessing individual identity, the young women are presented as Eastern, pagan, barbaric, semi-literate, and inarticulate, as a mob whose bad instincts triumph over the good ones. There is thus a similarity between the way they are represented and communists, especially the Soviets, in the unofficial yet common discourses in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the socialist East. These discourses rendered the Soviets as barbaric and faceless colonizers, who destroyed everything of value in colonized lands, creating a wasteland filled with anti-culture. At the same time, the fact that the young women cannot travel by themselves in an inhospitable land, but must rely on the old woman who knows it from pre-apocalyptic times, points to the ineptness of the Soviets in their efforts to colonize Central Europe. To return
to Rieder’s expression, it can be said that “the mighty,” namely the inhabitants of Central Europe, are humbled in Hotel Ozone, but those who overpower them, the colonizers, cannot take full advantage of this fact.

That said, not all is unattractive about the young nomads. The images of their skillful shooting, draining of blood, and skinning of Otakar’s cow, and especially taming of horses, evokes images of Amazons, the proud female warriors from Greek mythology. Hence, they evoke ancient times and a culture older than the civilizations whose disappearance from these post-apocalyptic lands is mourned. The overall ascetic style, marked by slow narration, scarce dialogue, minimal props, and black-and-white print, comparable to that of Bresson in Lancelot du Lac (1974) (except for the use of color), also helps to dignify the young characters. Both films, while showing the cruelty of a distant epoch (medieval times, the Earth of the future) convey yearning for its simplicity, implicitly contrasting it with the complexity of contemporary times. Yet it must be emphasized that such a reading is afforded only when one pays more attention to the film’s style than to its narrative.

Why, however, are women chosen as the last survivors in Hotel Ozone and represented as primitive colonizers? This question is especially worth asking because most post-apocalyptic narratives, beginning with The Last Man (1826) by Mary Shelley, feature either men or a mixed group of males and females. Although it would be impossible to answer this question fully, a number of factors are worth comment. One is the misogyny of the film’s scriptwriter, Pavel Jurácek, as testified by his other works. Another is the distinct anti-female flavor of the Czech New Wave (Hanáková “From”). This aspect of the New Wave can be regarded as an expression of the opposition towards socialist ideology which pronounced the equality of women and men, depriving men of their privileged position. It should be emphasized, however, that the loss existed only in socialist rhetoric; in reality in Czechoslovakia and other socialist countries, men occupied the main positions of power, as many “realist” New Wave films demonstrate, such as the works by Miloš Forman. Similarly, the freeing of women from the shackles of patriarchy brought about by the victory of communism amounted to the requirement for them to work at home and at factories, often in atypical jobs—for example on construction sites and operating heavy machinery—without receiving recognition proportionate to their input into the country’s wealth (Wolchik). Nevertheless, the very fact that women took the positions of men in industry led to identifying communism with a new, masculine woman who poses a threat to men and society at large. Hotel Ozone is a product of this (however misguided) association of communism with feminism and an expression of opposition towards both of these ideologies.

Sex Mission. Sex Mission was made sixteen years after Hotel Ozone. During this period the fear of nuclear war diminished but did not disappear in Europe. Accordingly, Machulski’s film, although it depicts the world after a nuclear catastrophe, was not discussed as a post-apocalyptic work, but as referring to
an arguably more realistic threat: men’s domination by women. Second, it was made at the time of triumphs of genre and popular cinema in Poland. Juliusz Machulski, thanks to his debut *Vabank* (1981), a pastiche of Polish prewar criminal comedy, and the fantasy *King Size*, became the champion of genre cinema on Polish soil. *Sex Mission*, which was his second film, confirmed this position. In *Sex Mission* Machulski blends two genres never before combined in Polish cinema, sf and comedy, inserting references to cinematic, literary, and even radio works. The main sf device is the motif of prolonging the human lifespan by hibernation and time travel. The story begins in 1991, when two men in their late thirties, pathological womanizer Maksymilian “Maks” Paradys and superstitious, fretful biologist Albert (a reference to Einstein) Starski, allow a famous scientist, Professor Kuppelweiser, to place them in hibernation for three years. Albert does it out of love of science and to help humanity prolong life; Maks, on the other hand, as his wife claims, is driven by greed and unwillingness to provide for his young family. The experiment proves unsuccessful, or too successful, as the men sleep until 2044. When they wake, they cannot recognize the world: they are locked in a bizarre white room with plastic furniture, the food is artificial and tasteless, and, most important of all, there are no men. The disappearance of men is allegedly the result of another of Professor Kuppelweiser’s disastrous experiments: after inventing a substance paralyzing male genes temporarily, he decides it would be disseminated globally by means of a so-called M-Bomb. Instead of temporal paralysis, the bomb eliminates male genes forever, causing a self-annihilation of the male gender just as in *Hotel Ozone*. As a side effect of the radioactive pollution of the M-Bomb, the surface of the Earth becomes uninhabitable and the people are forced to relocate to underground mines, gradually expanded to a subterrestrial “skyscraper.” After the war, a feminist League seizes power, and all the surviving boys are “naturalized” to girls. The remaining females procreate girls by artificial parthenogenesis. While the film suggests more than once the possibility of lesbian relations, they are represented as pathological, hence reaffirming the heteropatriarchal norm. The ideology and even the language used by the men’s future hosts is utterly sexist; in their new world the sexual drive is eliminated or, more precisely, transformed into ambition for a career; the history of humankind is re-written to demonstrate that women were always oppressed by men and life without them is eternal bliss.

While Albert quietly resigns himself to life among apparently sexless females, Maks tries to seduce the women and succeeds. Lamia from the Archeo (archeological) corporation, which discovered Maks and Albert, experiences a profound change in her mind and body after being kissed by Maks; her repressed sexuality emerges, evoking erotic fantasies. She starts to question the rules by which she was raised, as well as the sincerity and honesty of her superiors. Eventually she rejects the ideology of the women’s state and becomes an ally of the male survivors. In the meantime, Maks and Albert discover that this society is autocratically governed, hierarchically
organized, and highly militarized. The chief authority is the sinister Female League, at the head of which stands an old, mysterious woman, addressed as Her Excellency. Moreover, they discover that there is little real friendship among the women, the rhetoric of sisterhood masking rivalry, jealousy, and distrust. The fate of the two outsiders is voted on at an assembly of the two corporations, Archeo and Genetix, which conclude that the men have to undergo a sex-change operation. Before the decision is put into practice, however, Maks and Albert make several attempts to flee, the last one of which is successful. With Lamia’s assistance, the men, determined to die rather than be castrated, exit the subterranean society into what seems to be an uninhabitable, post-apocalyptic desert, polluted by “Kuppelweiser Radiation,” only to learn that it is just a painted panorama surrounding the entrance of the underground structure. Cutting through the panorama, the men and Lamia come to a beach. Exploring the environs, they wander through a wood, and when they notice a stork flying above the treetops, Maks realizes that the air has to be breathable and they remove their protective gear. Soon they find a villa surrounded by a beautiful garden, enclosed within a tall stone wall, and furnished in the style of the late twentieth century. An officer of Genetix, Emma Dax, follows the refugees, determined to capture and return them underground, until the news on TV announces that the women have died and the men undergone “naturalization.” The four deserters now pair up and have (heterosexual) intercourse, laying the foundations for the rebirth of the “natural,” that is, heteronormative world order. Her Excellency, who turns out to be a man, soon visits the villa. He explains to Maks and Albert that staying in the “eye of storm,” pretending to be a more extreme feminist than the other women in the League, was the only way to preserve his maleness and find refuge from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bunker. The fact that Machulski’s cross-dresser turns out to be a fake cross-dresser, namely a man who wears female clothes not for pleasure but out of political necessity, adds to the film’s endorsement of heteropatriarchy. The film ends with Maks and Albert, dressed as officers of the League, secretly visiting the underground “hatchery” to contaminate the system with semen. The last shots show a nurse screaming in terror and a baby with male genitals in close-up. Hence, the titular “sex mission” of Maks and Albert is complete.

Many aspects of life in the post-nuclear world, as depicted by Machulski, work as metaphors for post-1945 Poland and any communist country, as the director admits (Napiórkowska 15; Majer 220-22). The heavily guarded bunker can be regarded as Poland, or the whole Eastern bloc, under Soviet leadership. The rule that it must not be left by its inhabitants without special permission resembles communist emigration and travel policy. Mirroring the single-party communist system in the darkest days of the Stalinist regime are the military regime (which also refers to the martial law in Poland effective between 13 Dec. 1981 and 22 Jul. 1983), the highly hierarchical ideological institutions (the corporations) subordinated to the “apparatchiks” of the League and topped by the supreme authority of Her Excellency, as well as intolerance
of deviation from the established norms, values, and dogmas. The “feminist” educational system is geared towards rearing law-abiding girls and women who are fed a doctored version of history (all vices were invented by men, Copernicus and Einstein were women, men tortured women before the League took power) and indoctrinated with hatred towards the male gender. The portrayal of media practices also mimics communist ones: in the cell where Albert and Maks are kept, upbeat march music is emitted through a remote-control radio system; people are encouraged to fill their spare time watching television, which broadcasts educational-instructional programs, sport events, and other light entertainment to lull and suppress any germs of critical thinking; and news reports bend and/or conceal the truth. Machulski demonstrates that the inhabitants of this “perfect world” are fed lies. For example, they think they will die if they leave their bunker, which can be seen as an allusion to communist propaganda that internal goods are of the highest quality while everything outside is worthless or poisonous. Similarly, they are told that the extinction of men was the result of a nuclear war, but its cause is unknown. This motif has its equivalent in the stories of the murder of dissidents who, according to communist propaganda, died of natural causes. Moreover, there is a huge gap between the relative poverty and anonymity of ordinary members of the women’s state and the luxury and status enjoyed by Her Excellency. In common with Stalin, Ceaușescu, and prominent Polish politicians from the communist period, including the previous Party leader Edward Gierek, she remains “above” the system she leads, while at the same time maintaining the lie that she is an equal. The best testimony to the hypocrisy and detachment of Her Excellency is her masculinity, which contradicts the ideology she preaches. The story of Her Excellency, whose mother raised him as a girl because she did not want to have him “naturalized,” also brings to mind the tragic fate of Jews forced into hiding during World War II. There is even an equivalent for the communist resistance—the so-called decadence camps inhabited by disobedient women, who apparently refused to be intoxicated with the mind-numbing and body-controlling drugs; in contrast to loyal citizens dressed in uniforms, they wear bohemian clothes, play and dance to jazz (at some point officially condemned in the Soviet bloc as a symbol of decadent Western youth culture and democratic values), eat real cakes, and engage in lesbian sex. When caught by the police, they are disciplined in work camps; particularly dangerous criminals are incarcerated in prisons modeled on Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon.

The fact that Maks and Albert escape their fate and undermine the system is as much a testimony to the power of dissidents, whom they epitomize, as to the internal flaws of the authoritarian state on the verge of a collapse. Indeed, Machulski’s film was made soon after the period of martial law in Poland, the last and half-hearted attempt by the communist rulers to preserve political hegemony, undermined by the triumphs of Solidarity. This movement
was joined by some members of the Party and economic establishment, as well as by numerous ordinary workers.

Why choose women as a symbol of communist oppression and colonization? Part of our answer is the same as with *Hotel Ozone*: the film’s misogyny can be seen as a backlash against socialist ideology that pronounced the equality of women and men and hence, “harmed” men. Yet, in Poland the opposition to granting women equal rights with men was particularly strong because of the special position enjoyed by the Catholic Church, with its conservative view of the role of women in society. In Catholic discourse, women fulfill their role by being mothers and homemakers; other public roles they might play should be modest so as not to interfere with their “natural” functions and destination (Mazierska and Ostrowska). Put bluntly, according to the Catholic Church, women are not fit to rule. The film makes this point by showing that those who hold higher positions in the League hate and undermine each other in private, while in public pretending they are united. The internal divisions among women, of course, help the men overcome their predicament. Moreover, in the bunker women ultimately do not rule; they are ruled by an aged, weak, and emasculated man, which suggests that in a public sphere even the most hopeless men are better than the most able women. This point is emphasized by casting Wiesław Michnikowski as Her Excellency, known predominantly from the popular television series, *Old Gentlemen’s Cabaret* [Kabaret Starszych Panów; 1958-66], where he played weak men overpowered by strong women.

The most ridiculed aspect of the futuristic women’s state is the use of artificial parthenogenesis. This opposition against women taking care of their procreation invites examination in the context of the Catholic Church’s condemnation of “unnatural” regulation of procreation. Looking at the film from a postcommunist perspective, one can see in Max and Albert’s sabotage of women’s successful reproductive technology a premonition of the triumphs of the conservative moral right, which dominated the Polish parliament and other institutions of power after 1989, and managed to introduce a restrictive anti-abortion law in 1993. In a wider sense, adding “seeds of penises” to what were meant to be future girls can be read as foretelling the diminishment of women’s power and silencing of their voice post-1989. Machulski not only suggests what would soon come, but renders the expected changes as positive—as a long awaited return to the natural order that would be beneficial for the whole society.³

Machulski’s discourse on femininity and feminism was also in tune with conservative political attitudes among the creators of what is described as “Polish sociological science-fiction” (Wróbel). A sign of this is the close affinity between *Sex Mission* and the hugely successful radio sf series *Matriarchy* [Matriarchat; 1978], written by Marcin Wolski, an important representative of this subgenre, which was broadcast shortly before *Sex Mission* had its premiere. *Matriarchy* also constructs a dystopian vision of the future (or rather of the communist present) as utterly dominated by women.
and shows an unraveling of this world. As Jakub Majmurek observes, a clear sign of the conservative instincts of this group is that its members joined the political right in post-1989 Poland (163). Machulski’s subsequent political allegiance is more difficult to pinpoint, as he has been less vocal about his political views than Wolski, but no doubt his film was made with an eye to lure the fans of this sub-genre.

There is also a close correspondence between the perception of women offered in *Sex Mission* and that offered in Polish popular cinema of the 1980s. For example, several years after *Sex Mission*, Jacek Bromski made *Art of Love* (*Sztuka kochania*) (1989), which also put forward two ideas pervading Machulski’s film: women should not govern, but limit themselves to the private sphere; and, even in relation to their intimate sphere, they should rely on the advice of men, as opposed to their own knowledge or intuition (Kalinowska 70-1). The clearest sign that in its purported playful misogyny *Sex Mission* captured the spirit of the period is its unprecedented box office success in Poland during the 1980s. The acceptance of the film’s misogyny is also confirmed by the tone of reviews. The vast majority of Polish film critics not only welcomed the film’s anti-feminist message but “enriched” it with the expression of their own resentment and disrespect towards women. For example, one reviewer wrote that Machulski did not treat seriously enough the danger of liberated women who want to change men into “home dogs” (Piasecki; see also Winiarczyk). Conversely, in the Polish mainstream press in the 1980s we find no review of *Sex Mission* from a feminist perspective, which testifies to the dominance of the mainstream media by conservative male critics—a domination not diminished after 1989.

Thus, on the one hand *Sex Mission* presents an unmistakably conservative, heteropatriarchal standpoint on gender relations and, by extension, on social hierarchies in general. On the other, by providing an allegorical critique of the dominant political order and totalitarianism, and by referring to the Polish Solidarność on several occasions, it accommodates an element of resistance, perhaps even an anticipation of the collapse of the communist regime. All in all, the film’s overt antipathy toward feminism should be considered in the context of “state feminism” or emancipation of the Eastern type, which, contrary to Western feminism, “grew out of political dogma and thus from different semantic and political registers” (Hanáková, “From” 146). The director of *Sex Mission* sees “state feminism” as contributing to repressing rather than empowering women, but this does not lead him to promote a different type of feminism. Rather he rejects it altogether as an obstacle to a cohesive society. Resentment of feminism and communism are therefore intertwined, and the idea of a nation state is fundamentally linked with heteronormativity. In *Sex Mission*, male bonding among Albert, Maks, and Her Excellency perfectly illustrates the homosocial base of the nation state as a community of masculine comradeship (see Anderson 7). In combination with affirmation of heteropatriarchy as the “natural” world order and the critique
of “transnational” communist ideology, it is not difficult to conclude that *Sex Mission* communicates a strong desire to reestablish the Polish nation state.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, we want to reiterate our claim that in these two Eastern European post-apocalyptic films women are given the role of survivors of a nuclear catastrophe who are also destroyers of anything of value left from a pre-nuclear past. Read metaphorically, they stand for the Soviet Union and its allies who were accused of colonizing Eastern Europe, which included demolishing a large part of its natural resources and precious pre-WWII culture, replacing it with anti-culture. Men, on the other hand, stand for the resistance against the Soviets, even anti-communist dissent. We argue that in *Hotel Ozone* women ultimately prove stronger and more resilient than the last male. Such a scenario suggests that there is no chance of returning to pre-communist times and conveys fear and respect for real women. In *Sex Mission*, by contrast, women are devoid of charisma and need men, who are represented as more intelligent and stronger, as the race of the future. Such a representation foretells the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, points to the need to free “socialist men and women” from the shackles of feminism, and suggests that it will happen soon. These films’ conservative stances on sexual identities and norms reaffirm the close connection between heteropatriarchy and the nation state.

**NOTES**

1. A sign of how little attention was granted to this film is Peter Hames’s *The Czechoslovak New Wave*, a highly influential work, which treats the film only briefly (146).

2. The number 44 that appears here is most likely a nod to the famous Polish Romantic work, Adam Mickiewicz’s *Dziady [Forefathers’ Eve, date of writing unknown]*. Part III of the work refers to a new Messiah, a savior of Poland and the world, whose name is 44.

3. Monika Talarczyk-Gubała reads the film as a premonition of the fall of communism in Poland, but she misses the connection between the film’s sexual politics and that of the leading Polish politicians post-1989. Instead, she sees in the agreement between Her Excellency and Maks and Albert to rule jointly an analogy to the so-called Magdalenka agreement, which paved the way to end communism in Poland, although on conditions that were convenient to communists (153).

**WORKS CITED**


**ABSTRACT**

This article contributes to the relatively under-researched field of Eastern European sf cinema of the communist period by looking at gender discourse in two films with post-apocalyptic settings: the Czech *The End of August at the Hotel Ozone* [*Konec srpna v hotelu Ozón*, aka *Late August at the Hotel Ozone*] (1967), directed by Jan Schmidt, and the Polish *Sex Mission* [*Seksmisja*] (1984), directed by Juliusz Machulski. While made in somewhat different sociopolitical situations and featuring disparate modes of expression (art house versus popular comedy), both films stand out for representations of problematic gender relations and identities, which seem to question the heteropatriarchal norm. By linking gender discourse with colonial perspective, this study demonstrates that both films in fact use the unbalanced gender situations to denounce the communist colonial rule and to promote the close connection between heteropatriarchy and the nation state.