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Fatalité de la maison : food trauma in post-transition polish pop culture

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Agata Michalak*

FATALITÉ DE LA MAISON.

FOOD TRAUMA IN POST-TRANSITION POLISH POP CULTURE

We rarely look at Polish pop culture's attitudes towards food. This article is an attempt to categorize ways in which food and changing foodways are an object of critical reflection in an array of cultural texts: a novel, movies, a play for kids, a TV series and hip hop and pop music lyrics.

Keywords: pop culture, Dorota Masłowska, food trauma, eating disorders, post-transition Poland

The last 25 years of Polish history have been marked by breakthroughs. Socio-economic changes have left a deep mark on everyday practices ranging from hygienic rituals to food and nourishment within the family, to favorite pastimes and holiday plans. Most Poles no longer struggle to put a warm meal on the table – and if they do, it is for economic reasons, not for lack of availability. Consumers are free to choose from a wide range of products: from local produce to delicacies from far away, from organic to mass-produced factory foods. If they so choose, they can dine out at a variety of restaurants, bars and bistros catering to all possible dietary needs at all possible price levels. However, this wild supply has also brought about problems. Economical availability aside, traditional ways of food production have been replaced by technologies that are neither transparent nor easily trusted. They have been often unveiled as cutting corners as far as quality and wholesomeness of the end products are concerned. In the changing biome altered by science consumers no longer trust the simplest of products, as they feel that even looks can be manipulated or misleading: to give one example, suspicious roundness and good coloration in fruit is often viewed as a sign of malignant practices.

At the same time, the thematic field of food is not actively present in Polish pop culture. It does not dabble in food. Food has never been of major concern to those with the symbolic power over the collective imagination; in a nation forced to fight for its essential rights for most of recent history, Poles are not prone to reflection on “sensual triviality” even though they deal with food on a number of levels every day. In Polish culture food has been a prop and a symbol of the ordinary, a way of underlining social class, be it the excesses of the

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nouveau-riche or the drab realities of the *hoi polloi*¹. It has been a marker of gender, and a prop in the hands of an unimaginative screenwriter, to whom it offers an accessible reservoir of telling character descriptions. All in all, the pop-cultural vision of food in the past 25+ years has very rarely been affirmative and/or complex.

Researchers in the fields of food, in political and visual anthropology alongside social sciences, on the other hand, have spent the better part of the past two decades deciphering our complex relations with food. As one of them, American anthropologist Carole Counihan, puts it, “Food is a many-splendored thing, central to biological and social life. [...] Food is the product and mirror of organization of society on both the broadest and most intimate levels. [...] An examination of foodways – behaviors and beliefs surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food – reveals much about power relations and conceptions of sex and gender, for every coherent social group has its own foodways” (Counihan 1999: 6). I would like to briefly bring up three authors whose work has shed light on the ways in which pop culture can serve as a means to deciphering deeper meanings underpinning modern Western (and Eastern European) societies, as well as on ways in which new attitudes have been ushered into post-transition Poland, only to become prevalent behavioral models for the young generation, aspiring to “success” defined by Western conventions.

One such telling example is the work of Fabio Parasecoli, an Italian-born American scholar versed in the dangerous liaisons between food and pop culture, who analyzes what (and how) meanings are attached to food in Western culture. In his book “Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture” Parasecoli unveils how food themes tend to be used by the mainstream media and pop culture for an array of goals, both conscious and sub-conscious, and, most importantly, how modern humanist thought may help the general public decipher the nature of “all kinds of cultural battles among different visions of personhood, family, society, and even economics” present within the realm of food, in order to achieve “a deeper, even if somewhat unorthodox, comprehension of our twenty-first-century globalized consumer society” (Parasecoli 2008: 4). Adopting findings in e.g. cognitive psychology, structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis with the goal of dissecting hidden societal orders (especially those aimed at women in relation to their bodies) and deeply held convictions, Parasecoli’s work offers the opportunity to practice the art of seeing “beyond the Matrix” (the systemic rules inscribed in the pop-cultural works of today’s world).

The American political anthropologist and geographer, Elizabeth C. Dunn, on the other hand, worked alongside Polish workers for 16 months during 1995–1997 in a privatized baby food producing plant, Alima, in the south-east of Poland, to gain insight into ways in which workers from a post-Soviet working environment negotiate their transition into a free-market economy. In her critical book “Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor” (2004, published in Poland in 2017) the author closely observes as the new

¹ Compare a recent political crisis involving political elites consuming octopus as a sign of prestige that caused and widespread social uproar and popularization of the term “*ośmiorniczki*” (octopus in diminutive form) to apply to lavish lifestyles of the people in power, vs. popular memes created after the city of Radom organized a collective Christmas Eve in the city square in 2012 with free drinks that disappeared within seconds, giving birth to images of haphazard grabbing, epitomizing parsimony (“*chytra baba z Radomia*” – “the stingy old hag from Radom”).

American owners, the Gerber Corporation, introduce their highly standardized analytical tools and accounting techniques to measure productivity and differentiate between classes within the food plants' workforce. More importantly, though, by a stroke of luck Dunn gains unique access into the private lives of her coworkers. It is this latter insight that offers the greatest findings in relation to food and gender roles; Elizabeth Dunn deciphers powerful imagery based on traditional gender roles, supported by a Catholic upbringing, in a myriad ways in which especially the female workers see their roles in society, and, as a result of a specific mindset, also within the changing company, referring to it in maternal and familial terms.

In the case of Magda Szcześniak, assistant professor at the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw, and her 2016 book *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* ("Norms of Visuality. Identity in Times of Transition") food is not directly evoked in the processes that construct the modern societal "norm" of the Polish middle class. Her work, however, is a rare case of a non-sociological analytical approach to the strategies used to form normative behavior regarding looks, accessories and practices of an emerging social class (and an emerging minority identity, gay men) in post-transition Poland, in that it is entrenched in visual culture of the 1980s, 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s. By adopting modern cultural theory (including post-colonial studies) Szcześniak is able to translate a specific Eastern European experience of imitating Western patterns of behavior, style and thinking (for lack of local models to follow) in an act of "self-colonization"² into a broader phenomenon of constructing images that are neither innocent nor harmless, but, conversely convey a power of denoting a new "norm" and marginalizing attitudes that do not fit into the picture.

THE APPLE OF POP CULTURE'S EYE?

Cases when Polish pop culture does look at food intently are few and far between. Even then, the most intriguing ones present food as a means of entanglement. The least the characters who cannot control their lives can do is limit their "intake" of the world to a controllable minimum, as in observations of strict dietary systems. After all, it is their own body, the most intimate of realities, that they involve in the process. Abstaining from eating can be a way to resist the overwhelming consumption pressure, the system that dictates our consumer choices and behavioral patterns. This kind of aberration seems to be the favorite subject matter of writer Dorota Masłowska, from whom a novel, a play and a song will be analyzed in depth in this article. Director Małgorzata Szumowska, on the other hand, points out that numerous problems with the modern self are seemingly resolved through eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia. Close scrutiny of a menu in a situation that seems devoid of any sense and order – to Szumowska's heroine in *Body/Ciało* (2015) this seems to be the only palatable choice. Magda M., the eponymous heroine of a popular TV series of the 2000s, is a mild version of the girl from *Body/Ciało*, trying as she might to fit in with the

² Alexander Kiossev, *The Self-Colonizing Metaphor*, "Atlas of Transformation", <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html>.

expectations regarding her class and gender roles. The most important and interesting moments are those when her mask of successful middle-class businesswoman falls off, and the real Magda emerges with all of her personal and, intriguingly, culinary quirks. Those, on the other hand, are the laughing stock of Taco Hemingway, a successful young rapper, whose song *Proteinoholics* (Proteinoholicity in Polish, Taco's language of choice) is a mocking display of food obsessions, dietary inconsequence and superstition. Being an intelligent observer, Taco sees through the overly cautious and exclusive dietary trends to find the young generation anxious and positively transfixed by contradictory advice.

These examples form a unison of authorial voices who by definition distrust trends popular with the general public. Their distrust, however, is underpinned by an equally popular belief that the information age is feeding us too many bits of information to process, too many factors to take into account. The conglomerate of ideas, myths, truths and half-truths (post-truths?) revolving around food is so immense that it turns an act as simple as eating into a political statement, a bold decision or a concession in favor of the system. In this paper I will try to tap into the increasingly popular intuition that food has ceased to be an innocent subject altogether.

Dorota Masłowska is by far Poland's keenest observer of culinary trauma. Some of the most powerful, abject and/or subversive food-related imagery has been borne out of her imagination. It is as though she has access to our weird and shameful dreams – how else could she get all of it so right? There are few writers who match her acute sense of observation of the daily absurdities, the boorish yet aspirational aspects of our actions. It is especially visible in our culinary sympathies, in the hope of creating a cosmopolitan vision of the self through food, such as when we used to cook everything with pineapple in the 1990s just to make it seem more exotic, or now, when we rush to adopt all gastronomical ideas from the West, no matter how unsuited for the local market. “I like the colorfulness and multidimensionality of the world that manifests in a meal; the multitude of threads that interweave in the act of cutting a melon from Ecuador on a cutting board from China and biting it with Polish teeth in Germany. I like it a lot when reality thickens at the table as if in a lens, and creates an impression of life through the clothes of the diners, music from the radio, sound of an orchestra keying their instruments or the TV malfunctioning, through table-setting or the lack thereof, the smell of the room or the wind blowing through a guest's hair” – confesses Dorota Masłowska in the introduction to a compilation of texts on food entitled “More Than You Can Eat” (Masłowska 2014: g6). We understand it then, to her our table is the Stendhal's mirror, walking along a main road, and reflecting it all: the high and the low, the abject and the sublime. Arguably it is more visible in her essays, which, although written in her hilarious, distinctive style, is not a purely literary construct. She concedes that the culinary subject matter may seem a little odd against the backdrop of her work, as she expressly avoids it, brandishing an “antikitchen attitude”: her characters do not eat or cook, as the author sees these actions as “too positive”. Masłowska concludes, however, that she has no longer been able to uphold the youthful belief that the world of culinary pleasures, if neglected, would cease to be and thus usher in a collapse of the consumer world and a new paradigm that consists only of matters of extreme intellectual value. She is also being a little coquettish, as her world *is* subtly imbued with culinary undertones, even if what she chooses to portray is more often than not the reverse of sane behavior. All in all, there is not a writer in Poland

who could symbolically point out that greasy spot of mayonnaise on our pants or the crumbs of crisps in the creases of the car seat with more flair. This interest in our idiosyncrasies has resulted in the creation of, among others, Angela, who vomits stones in Masłowska's debut novel "White and Red"; a witch on a human-free diet in the children's play "How Have I Become a Witch"; and a woman who bakes bread compulsively in the song "Bread" by Mister D, Masłowska's musical alter ego.

THE POET

Angela, "thirty three kilos of steaming despair" (Masłowska 2015: 67), is a gothic freak who stumbles across Andrzej "Nails" Robakowski, the main character of "White and Red" (originally published in Poland in 2002). A high school student who dreams of being a poet is at the same time naïve and blasé in ways that even the cynical low-brow, drug-abusing slacker Nails finds touching. She acts out on the need to belong, typical of her age, and chooses the gothic subculture, but even though the longing is common to many, the writer still manages to make Angela look laughable. She wears only black, like the goths, and holds dear their nihilistic ideas, but at the same time listens to all kinds of music, gets along perfectly well with the plebeian Nails and dreams of a boyfriend who is romantic and caring, but at the same time grim and tough. She would like to be a poet, but speaks only in clichés. Her mouth, full of "revelations" about God, people and the world, produces words with astounding speed. Her talkativeness remains in stark contrast with her thinness, which is partially due to her kind heart, or, more precisely, the vegan diet in line with her romantic ideas of not adding more suffering to the world. Masłowska describes her in Nails' words, as "pretty enough". "Hot, depending on your taste. If you like that anatomic mood where you can see each shinbone, then sure, she's hot. But only for some. You have to be a Jew-lover to stand every movement of her skeleton under her skin" (Masłowska 2015: 52). No wonder this bright-eyed lass looks this way. Her diet is, after all, a hilarious "single grain of rice washed down with six glasses of boiling water" (Masłowska 2015: 53). She adds one grain every day, the amount of water stays the same. This kind of diet prevents not only animal suffering, but also the destruction of plants, the consumption of paper, the consumption of money – the author sneers on. Dorota Masłowska is indeed allergic to all forms of ideology, even ones in keeping with her antibourgeois disposition. That is why Angela's ideas, representing a few different standpoints – the vegan, the alter-global, the nihilistic – are laughed at all the same. Angela actively mashes them into a pulp and the effect resembles her curious diet: a single grain of sense washed down with six glasses of water.

Angela's rants cannot be taken seriously. Dorota Masłowska gives her one more deplorable trait: Angela keeps vomiting, especially when fed by Nails a healthy cocktail of amphetamine and spirits – the only thing both of them ingest throughout the story, with the minor exception of some fast food. Her indisposition is especially awkward in social situations:

"To which she, like she'll burst from the pullout, like she'll fly off to the crapper. She's got to go puke again, this time maybe she'll puke out her stomach and her whole alimentary apparatus" (Masłowska 2015: 54). Nails checks in on her, as he has witnessed similar fits

before, and there she is, puking up a fist-sized stone into the bathtub amid loud clattering noises. Right after, a rain of gravel follows. Nails is consumed by a fit of disgust no lesser than Angela's convulsions. "A young lady with stones inside" (Masłowska 2015: 55), he snorts, furious. And who could blame him – he was in for some fun, not manning a small home quarry. "What, Angela, you like to eat rock, huh?", he taunts her. "Low-cal, I understand that according to your diet that's a delicacy, to eat that kind of boulder. Poisonous, but fuck-all if it's not nutritious" (Masłowska 2015: 56), he sums up, and while he is, in fact, appalled by the whole scene, the sentiment does not stand in the way of his deflowering Angela.

This girl is not in control of her digestive system. No, she's not making herself throw up to let the reader conveniently diagnose her with an eating disorder. Those paroxysms of puking are rather the reverse: a lack of control, an organic allergic response to reality. It is teenage angst expressed not so much in barring the world from entering in, as in extracting the cold and ruthless elements from within. It can be seen as a form of expiation of whatever is weighing down Angela's poetic soul. It is also quite witty, as in fact the girl is not in love with Nails, but with Robert Sztorm, an heir to a sand factory. This is the last brilliant brushstroke in the portrait of a teenage goth: gloomy, rebellious, nihilistic, at least on a declarative level, who has to be "hardcore" if she is to represent a subculture that deprives life of any meaning whatsoever. From a 2002 perspective, when everybody under 30 is, or seems to be, under the spell, or rather in the yoke of, wild capitalism,³ Angela's attitude may seem truly subversive.

THE WITCH

Twelve years after "White and Red" not only teenagers are on a diet. These days witches are also very careful about what they eat. Especially the bad ones. They have quite a few limitations, as we find out thanks to Dorota Masłowska's play, "How Have I Become a Witch". They cannot eat just any child. Witches can only consume the naughty ones and have to be very cautious about the "disgustingly well-behaved" kids, because eating them by accident can have the gravest consequences for their health. That is also why the main witch character eats very rarely – maybe once every two years.

"–This diet works wonders. But there's one caveat: eat every two years. Before that, if need be, and there's baby-porridge or even a kid-roast... – Pardon? – I mean a lamb-roast or some baby carrots, I'd never touch them" (Masłowska 2014: 30), says the Bad Witch to the child protagonist. But the little girl is not attacked at once, because she is one of the polite lot, with virtually no sins to confess (mainly just one, and culinary, too: she hides uneaten sandwiches underneath her bed). This causes the witch to look for an evil boy stuffing his face with crisps for her stew to make up for the girl's goodness. He is found in Boguś, a boy in the theatre audience, fiddling with and rustling his chocolate bar wrapper and playing his iPhone games.

In her pursuit of both children to prepare her "*fatalité de la maison*" ("fatality of the house", Masłowska 2014: 20), the witch meets her colleague, Malodoria von Urine, a traveling

³ Compare: Dunn, Chapter 3: *Niche Marketing and the Production of Flexible Bodies*.

saleswoman with the Lux-Stench company. She is trying to lose weight for the great sabbath and, has thus been “on a humanfree diet, eating just beetles, frogs, crow’s feet and rat noodles” (Masłowska 2014: 109). Malodoria also finds the girl very appetizing, thinking she would make a great ham. The protagonist luckily knows the right charm (which curiously goes like this: “Heineken! Open Air! InterMarche! Tesco!”⁴) and rescues herself, condemning the witch hereafter to a “foodless diet” and, as a result, to drowning in her swimsuit before she can make it to the swimming pool (as she is so thin).

While Dorota Masłowska creates a vision that is inherently funny, it is also pretty scary, as only the antagonists are granted the privilege to disobey and escape the pressure of capitalistic consumption. Even if their abstinence is the outcome of conditions, even if their bellies are always rumbling to the rhythm of the saddest of songs, the witches are free to give up consumption even for a period of two long years – very much like the medieval saints with whom modern anorexics sometimes equate themselves (compare: Bordo 2003: 68). (They also have one more privilege, that of maintaining their privacy while knowing exactly what is going on in other people’s homes). The Bad Witch is imploring us, the viewers, not to tell anyone where her little hut is, as she would otherwise be harassed for days on end by people trying to coerce a prophecy from her. The richest would come to ask for a palm-reading, the poorest would send text messages asking for auguries and camp outside her house with a grill, a six-pack of beer and Capital Radio blasting from the loudspeakers. The reader, fascinated by the witch’s individuality (which, by the way, is able to shine through her body – an ideal we all try to attain through dieting, as Fabio Parasecoli rightly points out: Parasecoli 2008: chapter 4, 85), quickly understands that in the world of common availability this little bit of fasting and privacy takes on a whole new meaning and appeal. This eccentricity, if not forced, becomes a value. It makes one realize how many things in the surrounding world are really superfluous. If one decides to stop one’s mindless chewing-and-digesting apparatus in its tracks, one may have a chance to notice that the slowly turning hot dogs at the petrol station indeed have something ominous about them.

THE BAKER

In the song “Bread” by a certain Mister D., a young sporty type meets a girl, the narrator, on the way to the local supermarket and tells her how his mother discovered the advantages of home baking and found the meaning of life. “Once always pissed, now she’s smiling like crazy, bakes her bread every day, her life’s no more hazy”, wails the stage alter-ego of Dorota Masłowska, and the listener starts wondering whether that is such a good thing. Baking as a road to personal salvation and a favorable comeback to traditional gender roles ceases, however, to be a miraculous cure for existential pain, as the friend’s mother quickly ends up in an intensive care unit in the terminal phase of some disease. When she is gone, the narrator

⁴ Alluding to a number of brands that are all too familiar to the Polish consumer, with Tesco and InterMarche being large supermarkets, and Heineken Open-Air, the name of a very successful music festival, previously sponsored by the beer brand Heineken.

takes over the beneficent bread-making machine and stops going out altogether, baking and baking on end, forming a whole world from loaves of bread. She, too, gains a new perspective on life, one that is “no more hazy”.

This simple equation – baking restores the meaning of life – is a good postfeminist joke, especially in the light of the video for the song, shot by Krzysztof Skonieczny, a young and talented Polish director, cinematographer and artist with a predilection for blurring boundaries between genres and styles. We see a teenage girl from the housing projects (played by Dorota Masłowska herself), dressed like she loves a cheap disco night. Her equally young friend is a tracksuit sporting, equally lowbrow character – a member of the “*dresiarze*” (literally: those who wear tracksuits) subculture that is so eagerly portrayed in Poland, as it is at the same time quite vivid and uncomplicated. The gender and social roles in place, this image alludes to the macho culture quite clearly. But then the “adult” version of the narrator turns out to be Anja Rubik – Poland’s most successful fashion model, the epitome of sophistication and avant-garde, which adds spice to the whole scene. Rubik is, like most models, very slim and that situates the baking obsession of her character somewhere in the realm of eating disorders. Careful coordination of meals for others, caring control over dishes produced by oneself, but eaten exclusively by others, is, indeed, one of the symptoms of anorexia. Dorota Masłowska does not, however, wait for us to jump to those conclusions; she teases us by the final sequence of the song, where the character starts building walls and doors of her house from loaves of bread. They do not feed anyone: this image is purely surreal. Maybe it is Mister D’s response to the gluten paranoia, or maybe she is surrounded by inedible bread, because it has ceased to be what our ancestors saw it as: the basis of our nutrition, and a symbol of hospitality. It has since become a threat, a symbol of nature mutated to the extent that is trying to harm its very children. A popular contemporary belief, aided by non-transparent food production chains, has people thinking that food has become as synthetic as cosmetics. Bread is no longer the food that we used to make ourselves out of flour, water and yeast or sourdough. It has become a ready-made product available fresh from the supermarket oven within minutes, as it arrives pre-prepared for baking, in a uniform, tasteless and bland version of its old, homey self.

Distrust of common dietary products is enhanced further by disquieting research showing that for example processed meat may, in fact, be carcinogenic to humans⁵. It was deemed potentially harmful just recently (in 2017) by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, an agency working within the structures of the World Health Organization, classifying processed meat as carcinogenic to humans, alongside tobacco smoking and asbestos. This kind of official narrative underlining the curious reversal of ideas regarding food is one of the reasons why it ceases to be seen as nourishment. No wonder artists like Dorota Masłowska react to that reality by bending the role of food completely.

On a slightly similar note, the soup served by the protagonist’s mother in Ignacy Karłowicz’s “*Gestures*” is an equally non-substantial food. It is used as a vehicle for motherly love and attention, which was pointed out by the writer himself in a column for KUKBUK

⁵ World Health Organization’s Q&A on the topic of carcinogenicity of red meat and processed meat: <http://www.who.int/features/qa/cancer-red-meat/en>.

magazine about the presence of food in modern Polish literature (Karpowicz 2016). “By serving the soup, mother showed care and love for her sons. Any other way was unavailable to her, and my protagonist has grown to hate tomato soup altogether” even though it came in two varieties, with rice and with pasta. We know this coercion and pressure to eat all too well: this is how feelings are manifested in a country where you can never be sure you will have another full meal the next day. Where sentiment has proven dangerous, the virtue of self-restraint and economical management is known to have saved lives. It is also a recognized phenomenon, dubbed by Sławomira Walczewska, Polish feminist and activist, as the “gastronomic mother” (Walczewska 1995). In an inspired piece of social observation, Walczewska pinpoints a character very familiar to Polish eyes: an ever-vigilant, motherly figure whose sole mission in life seems to be preparing food for and feeding her loved ones. What may at first seem like a semi-innocent control-obsession is quickly stripped by the author of all possible triviality or humor: it is femininity at its most vulnerable and insecure, pure fear of being left out and neglected. It is a vision of a woman so unstable in other aspects of life that she resolves to “gastronomical terror” to coerce some sort of respect. After all, a society that empowers women does not banish them to the kitchens, which become their sole refuge, the only foundation upon which to build their self-esteem.

In the light of so many pressures of the modern world finding their way into the realm of food, is it so strange that much deeper conflicts also play out there? This is where Małgorzata Szumowska’s territory begins in *Body/Cialo* (2015).

THE BULIMIC

In *Body/Cialo* the matter evoked by the title is a battlefield. It is led by teenage Olga (Justyna Suwała), who lost her mom recently and despite the passing of time is unable to come to terms with her loss. She punishes her body with alternating bouts of feasting and throwing up. She is punishing herself for her own inability to live and for the very fact that she continues to live, but it is also aimed at her dad, a District Attorney (Janusz Gajos), who has somehow adapted to the situation and “come back” to life. Olga decides that the punishment should be definitive: she tries to kill herself. After being rescued by her father, she is sent to a closed therapeutic community dealing with eating disorders, led by the uncharismatic but original Anna (Maja Ostaszewska). The stereotypical spinster therapist also has a side “hobby”, as she is a medium and talks to the dead. She sees Olga and her father as people who are badly in need of closure, so she tries to arrange for that in the only way she knows how.

To Szumowska food, too, is a center of obsession. She acknowledges as much in the extended interview “Szumowska. Cinema is an Art of Survival”, recalling her own food-related problems. In a chapter entitled “Thin” the director recounts her own family relationships in a home where everything was permitted. Szumowska’s mother, Dorota Terakowska – a respected journalist and writer of feminist conviction – is said to have told her daughter off for eating too much, which she in turn ignored for a long time. That is, until she decided to lose a lot of weight for a boyfriend and ended up in hospital. Szumowska downplays the experience in a conversation with Agnieszka Wiśniewska (as she did during an interview

I conducted with her for Weekend.gazeta.pl⁶), saying “Mineral salts had left my body. The doctors suspected heart problems. But this could happen to anyone” (Szumowska 2012: 49). Well, it could not. Szumowska adds later on that “every other person has food-related issues, but they just don’t talk about it” (Szumowska 2012: 50), which is another way of relativizing and belittling her experience while placing it in context of the anonymous “other”. Lacking more information on the subject, we can only draw conclusions from her own actions, looks and statements, and she has remained extremely shapely, leading a very active and sporty lifestyle. She claims that food is a source of power for her, that she does not limit herself and eats as she pleases. Perhaps, however, there is more to that than meets the eye.

I evoke the director’s own experience only in the light of how well she understands the subject of food-related issues. And in fact she does seem to understand them well. Szumowska is aware that girls from the therapeutic group use food in all possible ways: to blackmail their families, to fight for control and to create their own, often unrealistic image, but not to sustain their organisms. The anorexic girls in Olga’s group regard Miss Anna with disgust, looking at her perfectly normal figure and saying that her “obesity” is a sign that she does not “take care of herself”. In one harrowing scene they are asked to draw their silhouettes on a wall. In those drawings their bodies take up much more space than they actually do, showing how misled they are as to their own appearances. Olga does not want to eat even on the inside, which results in her being fed an appalling “smoothie” made from the remains of her lunch. She has to eat it before she is allowed to leave the dining room, just like a child in kindergarten. This is food at its ugliest, stripped of its charm and beauty, and the girls with eating disorders only see it as a threat. Even the viewer is partial to that perspective: it is pure, plain nourishment, deprived of all cultural contexts. It is mush, a generic meal replacement that may well be fed to us some time in the future, as predicted by the creators of quite a few science-fiction movies, notably “Soylent Green” (1973) or more recently “Snowpiercer” (2015). By the way, such images of food could have only been borne of a mind that believes efficacy to be the driving force of the world. Any other would quickly see that even the anorexic girls consider deromanticized, “functional” food to be utterly disgusting.

In the inedible mush scene there is also a power factor at play: the staff is trying to make the girls, who refrain from eating, accept the lesser evil: food in a fluid form. The subjects, on the other hand, can often show independence in this one aspect only, defying their overbearing or absent parents. The scene reminds me of the notorious documentary on Amy Winehouse directed by Asif Kapadia, when the mother of the star remembers how at the age of fifteen or sixteen Amy announced that she had found the perfect diet. She confessed that she would eat anything she wanted, and then throw up. Nobody reacted to the notion back in the day, just like the parents of the girls in “Body/Ciało”, overwhelmed by their own problems. Olga’s father has them, too, coping with alcoholism and the ugliness and nonsense of the reality he is facing. His everyday life is finding corpses on the river bank and women who carry out illicit abortions in train station toilets. They are not in control of their bodies, left with no power over their own fertility. Olga and her friends, on the contrary, in a gesture stemming from total helplessness, take total control and stop eating altogether.

⁶ <http://weekend.gazeta.pl/weekend/1,152121,23195686,malgorzata-szumowska-polacy-maja-swietne-poczucie-humoru-ale.html> [18.06.2018].

(On a side note, I have to add that my interpretation of the anorexic gesture is not in keeping with the standard feminist approach that defines eating disorders as a way of internalizing the societal pressures exerted upon all women. Based on Susan Bordo's enumeration of significations that our culture – excessively interested in the body as a vehicle of meaning – attaches to slenderness, the need of total control over the body's intake of calories may be viewed as a way to break out of the domestic space into the public, and out of the characteristic traits traditionally attributed to women, an internalization of shame over excessive appetites, which Bordo equals with desire, or the willingness to comply with society's ideal of moral fortitude and willfulness, shining through the commitment to a stark regime of exercising and fasting (Bordo 1993: 68)).

Luckily Szumowska does not finish on that somber note. She sees a glimpse of hope, which lies not in faith in supernatural cognition or magical elements in the everyday, but in the fact that the characters can still be self-critical. In this beautifully directed movie with no superfluous scenes, reconciliation is not impossible. Szumowska is surprisingly warmhearted towards her characters, who only prove human, as shown best in the scene where the father's not-so-young lover (Ewa Dalkowska) dances naked for him. Watching her move, the viewer dreams of having such a kind relationship with his or her own body. There is hope that Olga, just like the director herself, will learn how to build one.

THE LAWYER

There is one more, less serious, diet freak in Polish pop culture. For many years "Magda M." shaped the way it portrayed young, urban, successful women – or women who aspired to be described that way. The past tense is used on purpose, as the world inhabited by Magda Miłowicz (Joanna Brodzik), if a little fairytale-like even in its own time, belongs to an era well before the 2008 crisis, Swiss Franc mortgages, and junk contracts (just like the realities described so aptly by Magda Szcześniak, who also explicitly omits women from her analysis, as she states that men were the main subjects of the "normalization project" of the 1990s – (Szcześniak 2016: 35–36)).

The very pilot of the TV series "Magda M.", which aired between 2005 and 2007 in Poland, shows the main character embarking on a new week with a new diet. Cut out from a magazine (who would do that today if they could just tap the right app on their smartphones?) and pasted onto the kitchen cupboard, it does not call for any special restrictions of certain groups of macro-ingredients, such as carbs or dairy products, nor does it flash the name of a diet guru. It is the simplest of diets: an apple and half an hour on a training bike for breakfast, then water for the rest of the day. A cleansing diet perhaps?

That we will not find out; we do notice, however, that it does not as much as raise an eyebrow of the capable young lawyer. She is such a strict believer in the idea that one must suffer to be beautiful, that she simply gets on the training bike on her breathtaking terrace on Wiejska Street and pedals on, smiling and conversing with her cat. It will turn out to be her signature attitude: she does what she is expected to with cheerful acceptance. Except for when it comes to men.

There is a widespread opinion among viewers that the series has some feminist undertones that make it interesting and helpful – the truth be told it exemplifies a single, independent woman who is enjoying herself despite not having a husband or a bunch of kids. She has a cat, a gay best friend and professional ambitions. She is at the same time, however, the embodiment of a stereotypical single urban girl: she is fulfilled professionally, socially and – occasionally – sexually, but is dying for a “real relationship”. It is from the likes of “Ally McBeal” and “Sex and the City” that “Magda M.” takes her cue (compare: visions of femininity in “Sex and the City” – Ostrowska 2011).

Magda’s modern image is complete with a set of girlfriends of contrasting character and marital status, girls’ (and occasionally co-ed) nights out, social responsibility (work for the Femina foundation!) and a job that is supposed to grant satisfaction: Magda’s efforts to be selected for more complicated cases at the law firm are one of the main topics of Season 1. She is also the center of attention of a few cynical men and prone to the typical love-or-friendship dilemma, as the promising Piotr (Paweł Małaszyński) walks in and out of view to make the story’s wheels turn. Last but not least, the distinctive gay character of Sebastian (Bartłomiej Świdorski) brings in the most pep, as it is in his company that the newcomer Magda experiences the nightlife and culinary delights of the big city. He knows Magda best and is the ultimate life-saver when she experiences a crisis; and he is the only one allowed to burst into her flat and stop her from binge-eating ice-cream and popcorn on a rough day.

This scene embodies the character’s predilection for asceticism combined with indulgence, when times are hard: Magda does not need to lose weight, which is obvious to everyone. She seems to be convinced, however, that a diet, along with a car and a good quality lipstick, is something that defines modern women. During the first season she does not stick to the diet anyway; it is rather there as a source of Sebastian’s jokes (“I gather that you had a single hazelnut with chives for lunch?”), a pretext to evade uncomfortable social or professional commitments (she manages to talk herself out of a date at a cafe, alluding to her dietary restrictions), or a reason to be mortified (she goes out for a run with a friend, because she ate a single piece of cake the night before!). Limitations to her appetite are just an expression of Magda’s character, which does not leave too much space for sensual pleasures. It does, on the other hand, leave an awful lot of space for an almost protestant dedication to hard work – as well as an expectation that it will be noticed and appreciated (a fully formed capitalist belief in the power of self-actuation of individuals that is characteristic of the new vision of the individual brought about by systemic change; compare: Dunn, Chapter 4, subchapter: “Znajomości”) and a willingness to make up for “sins”, even the smallest culinary trespasses, by spending hours at the gym. It is best seen in episode 6 of the first season, when Karolina (Katarzyna Herman) offers a piece of home-made cake to Magda and Agata (Daria Widawska). Magda responds by asking, half-jokingly, half-condemningly: Do you know how many calories these have?, while Agata, the most pleasure-oriented of the three, exclaims: “Like I care!”, and stuffs the cake in her mouth.

Inside her heart, however, Magda is dreaming of her mom’s (Ewa Kasprzyk) dumplings, and only Sebastian is privy to that. Those dumplings are a symbol of familiarity in a big city full of foreign phenomena. Magda does not find it hard to get accustomed to them, but when she is anxious, the familiar feels like a safe harbor. For Piotr, the beau of the series, a similar

role is played by his landlord, Mrs Natalia (Anna Polony), a woman brought up in the previously Polish territories of Lithuania. She rescues Piotr with her dumplings and home-made tinctures whenever he is going through an emotional rough patch, which usually happens when a woman is involved. Magda, on the other hand, is more susceptible to the fitness-propaganda when in such a state of disarray. Her self-consciousness is usually combined with a suspended belief in her own physical allure, which is almost irritating, as Joanna Brodzik always sports a truly impeccable form on set. But generally food, and especially traditional Polish grub, has a twofold role here: as a comforter to both sexes, and as a threat, something that keeps one at bay – but this applies to women only. A specter is haunting the Polish capital Anno Domini 2005 – that of a donut, a woman's worst fear, lurking and waiting only to ruin her body.

And even though we are lured into believing that we are dealing with a modern and conscious pop-cultural proposal that is not especially backwards, after all, the main character is volunteering for a foundation that helps women separate themselves from abusive partners, there is talk of developers driving people into bankruptcy – the essence of the series is still the love life of a Warsaw lawyer and her huge ego. It is a piece that is shot in a modern, appealing way and steeped in credible pop-psychology. This does not change the fact, however, that it is clearly headed towards the ultimate happy ending: fulfillment within a monogamous heterosexual relationship.

THE HEALTH FOOD FREAK

Taco Hemingway has evolved into one of the more intelligent voices of his generation. A young Warsaw rapper, born in 1990, he is neither an “original gangsta” straight from the ghetto, nor a cash-brandishing, ass-slapping “bling” hip-hopper of the well-off kind represented by Tede, a much older Warsaw rapper. He stands somewhere in the middle ground, which allows him to assume a unique position: that of a critic detached from the self-interest of any of the groups.

And a harsh critic and ironist he is, but with the fortunate trait of the best of them: he targets himself just as acutely, being his own favorite subject matter. Taco is a notorious detractor of trends, including ones he himself half-grudgingly observes. The overwhelming Polish food-mania does not escape him, and while in his lyrics he does use catch-phrases from the ever-present culinary lexicon, he is well aware of the scope of the obsession. “Buy only free-range eggs / Make sure the hens had time to chill / And the cows a fairytale life before death”, he entices his listeners in *Proteinoholics*, a track from the mini-album *Umowa o dzieło* (Temporary Contract). He alerts us to the content of MSG and mono-saturated fats, GMOs and pesticide residue in consumer goods, and is wary of the sugar levels in soda drinks and wheat bread (he advocates for bread that is “darker than President Obama”). His mantra goes on and soon one realizes that this set of “commandments” is a friend telling Taco what to do and what to give up. The friend's misstep, though, is the fact that he suspends all that dietary wisdom over the weekend. “I know his lot”, Taco pokes fun further. “They're doing push-ups / Drinking fish oil / They're at the gym 24/7 / Grabbing dumbbells / And then they grab the highballs”. It is inconsequence that he is after – the whole protein-fiber-obsession

paired with an incidental alcoholic or narcotic slip of the otherwise dedicated athlete. “So how much fiber is there in cocaine?”, asks Taco provokingly. “How much in Coke?”. “Zero grams”, is the relentless answer. “In this new millennium / Everyone’s an expert on a healthy menu”, Taco continues his rant, bringing up new vegan bars, chefs who have just opened another joint, honest honey, and cow suffering. And yet again he arrives at the conclusion that it is all very well as long as is not just talk.

It is hypocrisy that Taco Hemingway is allergic to, and his urban social class is an exemplary model. They seem to know what to do. “It is easy-peasy, Filip”, another friend of Taco’s (born Filip Szcześniak) is telling him. But the hardest part is to keep up the constant, consequent work on one’s weakness that prevent one from being the healthy, balanced, conscious and ecological individual one dreams of being. Why? Because it is contrary to our instincts that favor activities with lower engagement levels over more demanding ones. Because it is driving us crazy, as it consumes so much attention and energy that none is left for the real challenges in life. Because, finally, it is often mutually exclusive advice that leads to growing frustration. Taco sees his peers as poor bastards who lose battle after battle with their own inconsistency, fed on a capitalist self-help philosophy that makes them believe individual happiness is conditioned by constant personal growth, goal-meeting and hard work (very much in keeping with what Elizabeth C. Dunn has recognized as the ultimate goal of the new systemic change in the 1990s, forming the new middle class’s decalogue). Entangled in an impossible set of exigencies, they are constantly reminded of their own shortcomings, which, in turn, nudges at their self-confidence. It is a vicious circle, one that the new dietary trends seem only to perpetuate.

The refusal of food – be it for ideological or psychological reasons – is the darkest of contexts that surround food. Unless abandoned in time, such rebellion may ultimately lead to death. This cannot and should not be forgotten in the midst of all the beautifully shot food photography and infectious food porn. People’s relations with food can, in fact, be a way of fighting for their independence, as in Małgorzata Szumowska’s “Body/Ciało”, or it can be a form of disagreement to succumb to reality crushing one’s sensitivities, as in Dorota Masłowska’s “Red and White”, even if it’s a young pretentious poet whose integrity is at stake. The Polish pop-cultural repertoire of food-related themes can make us realize the distortion in an image of a 30-something, slim, professional urbanite, ready to work endlessly on her “perfection”, or the painful ineptitude of the “gastronomical mother”, pushed to her limits by the economical and emotional stipulations of modern interfamilial relationships. The younger generation is not much better off, held in a crossfire of contradictory advice that it can hardly fathom, let alone follow. In my opinion, however, the most subversive potential is invested in the image of the witches created by Dorota Masłowska. Calling forth a blatantly unattractive image of femininity, the author grants it a fair amount of freedom, free-thinking and independence from trends, automatisms and the routine activities of modern civilization. As if it was a trade-off, in which one loses something that our culture holds dear – physical beauty – but is, in fact, awarded with a lot more in return. (Very much like Janina Duszejko,

the main character in Agnieszka Holland's movie "Spoor", who thanks to being marginalized by her age and extreme sensitivity, is allowed more space for her actions.) It is not by accident that Maciej Nowak, Poland's most renowned food critic, said recently that he sees the diffusion of the gastronomical trends as working in line with capitalist interests, diverting attention from more crucial matters at hand.⁷ Abstaining from eating may yet again be one of the most subversive actions of our times.

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- Spoor*, directed by Agnieszka Holland, Poland 2017.

⁷ This is an opinion Maciej Nowak expressed in one of our private conversations, but similar, although not as explicit thoughts have been evoked in his column in KUKBUK Magazine in issues 24 and 25.

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