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The Kulturfilm on Kashubia in Stalinist Poland: What Went Wrong?

Abstract: This paper discusses the film project Kashubia, conceived by Edmund Byczyński in 1948 in the Educational Film Studio in Łódź. The main sources of the analysis are three reviews: first – the external expert opinion, commissioned by the Studio; second – the internal discussion of the film by the programming committee; finally – the statement of the censorship office. The analysis reveals the political control mechanisms established in Stalinist Poland for non-fiction film, as it was recommended to shape the discourse of Kashubia in a socialist realist manner. The filmmakers were required to depict the development of the region as a class struggle between the outdated capitalist exploitation on the one hand and the modern communist rationality on the other hand.

Keywords: educational film, socialist realism, visual representations of ethnicity, film production in non-democratic countries

The communists gradually seized power in Poland during the second half of the 1940s, first grouped around the Polish Workers' Party (Polska Partia Robotnicza [PPR]), and then, from December 1948, the Polish United Workers' Party (Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza [PZPR]). For film culture, the filmmakers' congress in Wisla in November 1949 was the turning point, resulting in two systemic changes. First, the directors of film production institutions were replaced, and second, from this point until the mid-1950s, socialist realism – which was already the officially established doctrine in the Soviet Union (Knight 2024) – became Polish cinema's prevailing aesthetic. These transformations have been extensively studied for feature films (Jockheck 2013: 128–131), but less so for non-fiction forms, including educational films.

The main centre of non-fiction film production in Poland was the Educational Film Studio (Wytwórnia Filmów Oświatowych [WFO]) in Łódź. This formed part of the Film Institute (Instytut Filmowy [IF]) until the end of 1949, when the IF was dissolved, and the WFO became a separate entity. WFO had enjoyed relative autonomy before then (i.e. producers of short educational films only had to submit their ideas to an internal WFO committee, and censorship did not excessively interfere in shaping these films). In the 1950s, under Szymon Maus, previously the head of the Provincial Office of Public Security in Łódź (Dondzik/Jajko/Sowiński 2019: 47), the WFO underwent significant changes: the studio switched to producing mainly instructional films for industry, while projects on the natural sciences, geography and culture, which had been already underway, were suspended or significantly modified.

Based on research in the State Archives of the City of Łódź (where part of the WFO's collection from 1949–1955 is located), this article presents a brief history of one such project. It was meant to be an educational film on Kashubia, an ethnocultural area in the historic Eastern Pomerania region in northern Poland, which formed part of Prussia for over 250 years. Since the footage has either deteriorated over time, or it was deliberately destroyed, this chapter discusses a non-existent film. Such accounts are quite common in film studies – in fact, they constitute a genre of cinema historiography. However, they usually focus on fiction films, for which a script serves as the vital proof of the lost film or the abandoned projects (Lubelski 2012: 20–24). The situation differs for non-fiction films, as there is typically only a short (often two or three-page) treatment; therefore, other documents – such as expert opinions, reviews and censorship opinions – are particularly significant.

The case of the *Kashubia* project

The surviving documents for the *Kashubia* project (which include several contracts with filmmakers, financial documents, as well as internal reviews and the statement of the censorship office) show clearly that the project was initiated in early 1948 as a series of short films on the so-called *Ziemie Odzyskane* ("Recovered Territories"). In this early period following the Second World War, the Polish authorities were particularly keen to emphasise the Polish character of these territories (Grzechnik 2017: 669). Therefore, these flicks were to combine physical and cultural geography issues in the spirit of the

Kulturfilm (for the discussion of the genre see Dewald/Öhner 2023). In mid-1948, Edmund Byczyński, the head of the IF branch in Gdansk-Oliwa, was commissioned to deliver footage for the *Kashubia* project. He was an experienced filmmaker, who in the 1930s produced several non-fiction short films, including the flick that turned out to be the classic of the avant-garde cinema, Stefan and Franciszka Themerson's *Europa* (1932). In the early 1948, he shot three unscripted short films: *Praca i piękno Raduni* (*The Work and Beauty of Radunia*), *Pojezierze Kaszubskie* (*The Kashubian Lake District*) and *Kultura Pojezierza* (*The Culture of the Lake District*). These films were edited into a single medium-length film titled *Kaszuby* (*Kashubia*) by October 1948.

The primary source of information on this project is an extensive assessment prepared in February 1948, signed by Andrzej Bukowski, a geographer in the Baltic Institute in Gdańsk employed as an expert by the WFO. The first part of this document includes a sequence-by-sequence summary. The distinctiveness of the film's original components is visible in this montage. The initial sequence of the film contained shots of „fragmenty krajobrazu, przeplatane ilustracjami z życia ludności"[1] (Bukowski 1948: 79). The second part had a completely different character: „jest jakby wyprawą historyka sztuki, który wyszukuje na Kaszubach i pokazuje zabytki głównie architektury i rzeźby, poza tym współczesne wytwórstwo artystycznego przemysłu ludowego"[2] (ibid.). At the end, shots of the three most prominent Kashubian activists and writers (Florian Ceynowa, Aleksander Majkowski and Hieronim Derdowski) were added, according to Bukowski, „bez jakiegokolwiek wewnętrznego uzasadnienia"[3] (ibid.). The overall assessment was devastating:

> […] brak dokładnej znajomości przedmiotu i w związku z tym brak z góry obmyślanego rusztowania kompozycyjnego spowodował z jednej strony rażące braki, z drugiej znaczne w pewnych wypadkach przeciążenie mniej ważnymi szczegółami. Do takich przerostów, szkodliwych ze względu na kom-

1 "[…] landscape fragments interspersed with illustrations from the life of the population". Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine. – K. K.

2 "[…] it is like an expedition by an art historian who searches for and shows mainly architectural and sculptural monuments in Kashubia, as well as contemporary folk art".

3 "[…] without any internal justification".

> pozycję całości, muszę zaliczyć zbyt szczegółowe zobrazowanie wnętrz kościołów w Kartuzach i Żukowie, mimo że pod względem technicznym należą te fragmenty do najlepszych.
> (Bukowski 1949: 3)

> […] a lack of thorough knowledge of the subject and, consequently, a lack of a pre-conceived compositional framework resulted, on the one hand, in glaring omissions and, on the other, in some cases, a significant overload of less important details. Among such excesses, which are detrimental to the composition of the whole, I must include the overly detailed depiction of the interiors of the churches in Kartuzy and Zukowo, even though, from a technical point of view, these fragments are among the best.

Bukowski's attention focused on physical geography. Regarding the Kashubian river Radunia, for instance, he noted that „należałoby pokazać jej odcinek między Somoninem a Żukowem, w szczególności w okolicy Babiego Dołu, gdzie jej spadek wynosi 3 m. na km […] oraz takie pozostałości po lodowcach, jak liczne narzutowe, przeważnie granity kamienie szwedzkie, w wierzeniach ludu zwane kamieniami diabelskimi, np. ogromne głazy pod Nową Hutą w pow. Kartuskim"[4] (Bukowski 1948: 77).

These excerpts from the review clearly show that the reviewer was a dedicated expert in earth science and regional studies who seemed to expect the film to include all the elements that presumably should be found in a high school geography textbook.

In the agriculture section, Bukowski questioned the depiction of ploughing using a wooden plough, arguing that such an image was rare and that in the film, the plough was pulled „przez dwa rosłe konie, gdy tymczasem w rzeczywistości taki drewniany pług częściej był ciągniony przez jednego konika, krową, lub nawet człowieka (zob. obrazy tego rodzaju np. u I. Gulgowskiego *Von einem unbekannten Volke in Deutschland*"[5] (Bukowski 1948: 76). He also

4 "[…] it would be appropriate to show the section between Somonino and Zukowo, in particular in the vicinity of Babi Dol, where its gradient is 3 m per km […] as well as several glacial remains as numerous erratic boulders, mostly granite Swedish stones, known in popular belief as devil's stones, e.g. huge boulders near Nowa Huta in the Kartuzy district".

5 "[…] by two large horses, whereas in reality such a wooden plough was more often pulled by a single horse, a cow, or even a man (for images of this kind, see for example, I. Gulgow-

noted the continuity between the interwar period and the post-1945 developments: „Przed ostatnią wojną zbudowano w Brusach największą w Europie suszarnię grzybów, którą po wojnie uruchomiono. Zatrudnia ona stale ok. 70 robotników, a w sezonie dodatkowo ok. 400. W ub. roku wyeksportowano 100 ton."[6] Furthermore, in tune with the communist requirements for recognizing geography as an economic science, Bukowski suggested rejecting shots showing grazing cows. He argued: „[…] hodowla krów znaczniejszej roli nie odgrywa na Kaszubach. […] słyną one z gęsi, gęś kaszubska zapełnia nie tylko rynki miast portowych (zilustrować), ale idzie także na eksport"[7] (Bukowski 1948: 76).[8]

In the human geography section, most of Bukowski's attention, however, was devoted to critisizing the part of the film which depicted church interiors in Jasień and Sierakowice. Although Bukowski was not a professional filmmaker and – to my knowledge – had no experience in amateur filmmaking either, he insisted that in this sequence the editing should not be „tak szczegółowa, analityczna, jak to pokazano na filmie. Zachodzi tu więc potrzeba dokonania znacznych skrótów. Przydługi obraz z chłopcem podziwiającym piękno rzeźb, obraz, o ile o mój gust chodzi, niezbyt udany, bo sztuczny, może wywołać wrażenie nudy"[9] (ibid.: 75). However, this does not mean that Bukowski, due to some idiosyncratic or socially required constraints, princi-

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ski's book *Von einem unbekannten Volke in Deutschland*". The latter refers to Ernst Seefried Gulgowski's work, published in German in 1911. In Poland, Gulgowski is known by the name "Izydor", which he used in everyday life, hence the reference to "I. Gulgowski".

6 "Before the last war, the largest mushroom drying facility in Europe was built in Brusy, which was put into operation after the war. It employs about 70 workers permanently and an additional 400 during the season. Last year, 100 tonnes were exported."

7 "[…] the cow breeding does not play a significant role in Kashubia. […] It is famous for its geese, and Kashubian geese not only fill the markets of port cities but are also exported."

8 In 2011, when I was co-editing the book *Deutschland und Polen: filmische Grenzen und Nachbarschaften* with Schamma Schahadat, a graphic designer from Schüren Verlag suggested to use for the first cover the – not particularly attractive – image of "Gänsedame", a secondary character in Robert Gliński's film *Die Unkenrufe* (*The Call of the Toad*), an adaptation of Günter Grass' novel on the fate of the Kashubians. Ultimately, after a lively exchange of emails, a different frame from the film was selected for the cover of the volume.

9 "[…] as detailed and analytical as it is shown in the film. Therefore, there is a need to make significant cuts here. The lengthy scene with a boy admiring the beauty of the sculptures, a scene which, in my opinion, is not very successful because it is artificial, may give the impression of boredom."

pally rejected images of places of religious worship; rather, he simply preferred to see others (he suggested the Oliwa Cathedral).

Following Bukowski's review, the WFO commissioned additional footage before submitting a new version of the film for evaluation. Once again, this version of the film is only apparent from its reviews; however, this time, it was not evaluated by a geography expert but by the internal WFO programming committee in Autumn 1949 (by that time, the programming committees in the film studios were already made up of people subordinate to the communist party). These evaluations were clearly political:

> Film ten nie stawia sobie pewnych celów określonych, jakie powinien mieć film dzisiejszy. Geografia jest nauką polityczną i ten film musi zaprezentować pewne fakty, które zawierać będą w sobie wszystkie zagadnienia polityczne, społeczne i gospodarcze. Film spełniłby swoje zadanie, gdyby pokazał nam przeszłość, teraźniejszość i przyszłość. W filmie tym należy podkreślić, że obszar Pojezierza Kaszubskiego przewidziany jest w planie gospodarczym na planową hodowlę owiec.
> (Protokół 1949a: 212)

> This film does not set itself certain specific goals, as a film today should. Geography is a political science, and this film must present certain facts that will contain all political, social and economic issues. The film would fulfil its purpose if it showed us the past, the present and the future. It should be emphasised in this film that the Kashubian Lake District is designated in the economic plan for planned sheep breeding.

The note which accompanied the decision contained the committee's detailed recommendations:

> Film należy koniecznie uzupełnić zdjęciami ukazującymi współczesne życie tego kraju i perspektywy rozwoju w Polsce Ludowej. Obok sekwensu 14 – pług – musi być pokazane gospodarstwo rolne (spółdzielnia produkcyjna lub PGR) z maszynową obróbką roli. Mizerne pola gospodarstw jednostkowych i bujne pola oraz zbiory w stodołach – na gospodarstwach państwowych (Gdzie takie są poinformuje chętnie Wydział Propagandy Komitetu Partyjnego

> w każdym powiatowym mieście kaszubskiego pojezierza). Dalej – na zdjęciu 30-31 – pokazać opanowywanie tego zagadnienia (hodowli bydła) przez PGR i Spółdzielnie Produkcyjne.
> (Ibid.)

> The film must be supplemented with photographs showing contemporary life in this country and the prospects for development in People's Poland. Next to sequence 14 – the plough – a farm (production cooperative or state-owned farm) with machine cultivation must be shown. The meagre fields of individual farms and the lush fields and harvests in barns – on state-owned farms (the Propaganda Department of the Party Committee in every county town of the Kashubian Lake District will be happy to provide information on where these are located). Next – in photos 30–31 – show how this issue (cattle breeding) is being mastered by state farms and production cooperatives.

The somewhat surprising claim that an educational film – which, after all, belongs to the non-fiction genre – should show the future (sic!) was repeated in another report: „Brak akcentów porównawczych, obrazujących Kaszuby w przeszłości, teraźniejszości i przyszłości, co filmy geograficzne z racji swego założenia powinny zawierać"[10] (Protokół 1949b: 213). As with other educational films of this time, the difference between the pre-war period, which was to be shown in an unfavourable light, and the post-war modernisation planned by the communists, was to be emphasised. It was therefore noted that it would be necessary to emphasise „specjalnie korzystne strony obecnej rzeczywistości, podkreślając dawną nędzę mieszkańców pojezierza, a obecne dążenie państwa do podniesienia dobrobytu"[11] (Protokół 1949c: 215). Another set of objections concerned the church sequence. This time, the recommendations left no room for doubt, as specific cuts were required: „mniej ciekawe sceny poskracać, jak na przykład figury świętych […] usunąć wzmiankę

10 "There are no comparative elements depicting Kashubia in the past, present and future, which geographical films should contain due to their nature."

11 "[…] the particularly favourable aspects of the current reality, highlighting the former poverty of the inhabitants of the lake district and the current efforts of the state to improve their welfare".

o skrzydłach ołtarza znajdujących się w muzeum w Londynie"[12] (Protokół 1949c: 215).

It is difficult to know whether the suggested changes were implemented before the censors reviewed the film. Presumably, the cuts (which are easy to undertake) were made, but no further material was filmed, as the censors' screening took place on 27 December 1949, a month after the WFO committee evaluations. The censors did not permit the film's distribution, with the brief justification that „w obrazach filmu jest wiele scen pokazujących nędzne chaty wiejskie, prymityw życia i pracy"[13] (List 1949: 70). It remains unknown whether any additional changes were included in the material presented to the censorship office, as the print is not available either in the vaults of the WFO or in the Warsaw based National Film Archive. One fact, however, remains certain: the author of the original footage, Edmund Byczyński, never made another film.

Mechanisms of political control over non-fiction film

The *Kashubia* film project reveals the political control mechanisms established in Poland for non-fiction film, which can also be seen in many other projects commenced in 1947 or 1948, and then suspended in 1949 or 1950. For the Stalinists, showing the Polish past of the 'Recovered Territories' seemed secondary. The textual conflict between the 'old' and 'new' was no longer to be presented as a struggle for national identity, as a conflict between the German and Polish cultures. The reality of 1950 made this difficult as East Germany became an independent state (the German Democratic Republic), and an ally of communist Poland. The actual opponents in this historical field were the interwar Polish authorities (as can also be seen in many other educational films, even instructional ones). Consequently, it seemed more important to shape the message of *Kashubia* as a socialist realist class struggle between capitalist exploitation, allegedly causing poverty, and communist 'rationality', manifested as state farms on the one hand and the fight against religion and

12 "[…] delete less interesting shots, such as figures of saints […] and remove the mention of the altar wings in the museum in London".

13 "[…] the film contains many scenes showing miserable rural huts, primitive living and working conditions".

the Church on the other. The fact that the required corrections meant shooting a completely different film was irrelevant; as the result, the *Kashubia* project became a collateral damage of the implementation of the Stalinist cultural policy to the educational film genre.

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