

THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN THEATRE OF COLD WAR STRUGGLES IN THE FEATURE FILMS OF THE THIRD POLISH REPUBLIC

Radosław DOMKE 

University of Zielona Góra, Poland

E-mail: r.domke@o2.pl

Abstract: *This article examines several Polish film productions that contain geopolitical codes, thus allowing an interpretation of the Cold War confrontations on the Central European stage from the perspective of Poland's filmography after 1989. Russians portray the antagonistic characters in these films, especially Soviet communist dignitaries, whether civilian or military. In contrast, Americans and other "defenders of democracy" in the Western sense of the term become the positive heroes. Thus, geopolitical codes – clearly identified – can indicate how the soft power actions of the United States of America contributed to the consolidation of a distinct image in Poland.*

Keywords: *geopolitical codes, PRL cinema, visual history, Central Europe, Cold War.*

Rezumat: *Teatrul central-european al confruntărilor din perioada Războiului Rece în lungmetrajele celei de-a Treia Republici Poloneze. Acest articol examinează câteva producții cinematografice poloneze în care se regăsesc coduri geopolitice, permițând astfel o interpretare a confruntărilor din perioada Războiului Rece pe scena Europei Centrale din perspectiva filmografiei Poloniei de după 1989. În aceste filme, drept personaje antagoniste, sunt ilustrați rușii, în special demnitarii comuniști sovietici, indiferent dacă sunt civili sau militari. Spre deosebire de aceștia, americanii și alți "apărători ai democrației", în sensul occidental al termenului, sunt portretizați drept eroii pozitivi. Astfel, codurile geopolitice – clar identificate – pot indica modul în care acțiunile de tip „soft power” ale Statelor Unite ale Americii au contribuit la consolidarea unei imagini distincte în Polonia.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the time of studying the outstanding works of geopolitical scholars such as Ratzel¹, Mackinder², and Mahan³, much has changed. Contemporary geopolitical discourse has significantly diverged from what we call classical geopolitics, giving way to critical geopolitics. This approach examines, among other aspects, the socio-political codes used to record issues related to time and space in public consciousness. Skilful interpretation of these codes broadens our understanding of geopolitics, encouraging reflection and a closer examination of cultural texts, among which, without a doubt, feature fictional films. In my paper, I aim to examine the geopolitical codes concerning Central Europe in the context of the Cold War, as reflected in selected Polish feature films produced after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The article does not include studies on social reactions to films screened in cinemas and on television in terms of the geopolitical elements contained within them. However, it shows how filmmakers sought to influence the social consciousness of viewers by selecting specific content and employing geopolitical codes related to the recently ended Cold War. The social perception of these geopolitical codes requires separate, more advanced studies on this issue.

Before I proceed to the main discussion, I must begin by defining what we mean by Central and Eastern Europe, as this is not always obvious in the literature on the subject. Among many definitions of this area, which is crucial both for global geopolitics and Polish history, I have decided to refer to the definition proposed by Andrzej Piskozub. In my opinion, he most accurately characterized this region in his geopolitical concepts, which will allow us to clearly understand the area in question and what we mean by Central and Eastern Europe. Only then can we move on to the discussion of the so-called geopolitical codes.

Central and Eastern Europe is an alternative name for the region that, until the late 18th century, constituted the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795). Within its borders were the native lands of five European nations, which in the 20th century formed their own distinct nation-states here: Poles, Ukrainians,

¹ Friedrich Ratzel, *Politische Geographie* [Political Geography], edited by Eugen Oberhummer, 3rd edition, München and Berlin, 1925.

² Halford John Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Charlston, Nabu Press, 2010.

³ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1890.

Belarusians, Lithuanians, and Latvians. Immediately prior to its partitions in 1771, the area of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was 733.5 thousand square kilometres.

During the Cold War period, the concept of Central and Eastern Europe took on a different meaning. For the purposes of my presentation, I will focus on countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and other Eastern Bloc countries within this region. In reference to Andrzej Piskozub's concept, my interests will also include the former territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that fell within the Soviet Union during the Cold War period.

The spatial extent of the Eastern Bloc, dominated by the imperial policies of the Soviet Union, was determined by the areas occupied by the Red Army in the final days of World War II. Soviet influence throughout Central and Eastern Europe was maintained by the presence of the Red Army, which was gradually withdrawn in the early post-war years. However, Soviet troops remained throughout the post-war period in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, and the Soviet republics, serving as a guarantee for the maintenance of the communist regime. The Soviet troops stationed in the European countries of the communist bloc were used both to intimidate the West and to suppress occasional attempts to overthrow the communist system in Central and Eastern European countries. The political status quo established in 1945 lasted until the late 1980s. The maintenance of Soviet influence in the Eastern Bloc after the intervention in Czechoslovakia (1968) in the socialist countries was ensured by incorporating provisions into their constitutions regarding alliances with the USSR and the leading role of the communist parties. In September 1968, Leonid Brezhnev announced the doctrine of "limited sovereignty" of the Warsaw Pact member states, granting the USSR the right to intervene militarily to maintain communist governments in these countries⁴.

CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS AND GEOPOLITICAL CODES

Critical analysis involves identifying the hidden sources of geopolitical concepts and situating them within the social space defined by tradition, culture, and historical experiences. In this context, geopolitical concepts are treated as

⁴ Marek Sobczyński, *Zmiany polityczne, terytorialne i spory graniczne w Europie środkowo-Wschodniej po 1989 r.* [Political, Territorial Changes and Border Disputes in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989], in Piotr Eberhardt (ed.), *Studia nad geopolityką XX wieku* [Studies on the Geopolitics of the 20th century], Warszawa, IG i PZ PAN, 2013, p. 183-185.

cultural practices that serve to create and impose a specific image of the world. Within geopolitics, the critical approach focuses particularly on attempts to reveal the strategic significance of geographical imaginations in international activities and in shaping the foreign policy strategies of a given power centre. Referencing Jacques Derrida's tradition of thought, it is recognized that the task of critical geopolitics is to deconstruct the ways in which political elites describe, present, and use spatial images in the exercise of power. According to critical geopolitics, the aim is to expose the manipulative nature of spatial imaginations and to demythologize them. Drawing on Michel Foucault, it aims to reveal the symbolic archaeology of the power of spatial imaginations. This approach demonstrates how geographical imaginations are shaped and how they can be manipulated and used for social legitimization of foreign policy directions⁵.

By the late 1980s, critical geopoliticians⁶ proposed a broader and more comprehensive understanding of geopolitics. Following Foucault's tradition, geopolitics should be considered a form of discourse and power/knowledge, thus the concept of geopolitics needs to be expanded to become as broad and comprehensive as possible. Geopolitics should be critically viewed as a practice of social discourse, through which both intellectuals and diplomats describe international politics in spatial terms, creating corresponding images and representations of the world. By doing so, they impose a dominant vision of reality, which does not necessarily align with the actual situation, but rather reflects the interests of power. According to this understanding, geopolitical studies become an analysis of the spatial understanding of international politics created by great powers⁷. Contemporary geopolitical analyses, focused on the growing role of information and the infosphere in international relations, primarily concentrate on the "cultural" impact of information and the capacity of telecommunication messages to shape the image of the world. This aspect highlights the increasing role of mass media in shaping perceptions and interpretations of the environment. Mass reception of media messages and participation in popular culture shape perceptions of the world and humanity's place within it.

⁵ Zbigniew Lach, Jan Wendt, *Geopolityka. Elementy teorii, wybrane metody i badania* [Geopolitics. Elements of Theory, Selected Methods and Research], Częstochowa, Instytut Geopolityki, 2010, p. 45.

⁶ More information about critical geopolitics could be found in: Gearoid o Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics. The Politics of Writing Global Space*, London, Routledge, 2005.

⁷ Zbigniew Lach, Jan Wendt, *Geopolityka*, p. 45-46.

Feature films help envision specific places and geographical locations and often play a crucial role in increasing public interest in international events⁸. They allow individuals to construct a personal map of the world and their perception of it, serving as a means by which we define nations, states, and the world itself⁹. They are part of the process of constructing knowledge about the world, providing viewers with a kind of “map of the world.” The growing role of the media amplifies its geopolitical significance. According to Jakub Potulski, the importance of understanding the role of mass media in shaping geopolitical imaginations arises from the fact that the transmission, circulation, and reception of information and images are never neutral processes and can be used to support the foreign policy agendas of major and influential powers, such as the USA. French geographer Yves Lacoste already considered that the production of geopolitical images is not only a function of geography and academic monographs but primarily of mass media, which generate “geographic clichés and images.”¹⁰ Geography is thus also conveyed through feature films¹¹. These messages depend on what the existing social order is willing to accept as geographical representations. Society is not rationally oriented but rather inclined to adopt the images of the world created by the media. One significant element in influencing the international environment, utilized by the US government, is the film industry. Through it, a world image aligning with governmental intentions is disseminated, aiming to mobilize public opinion and gain legitimacy for pursued policies. For instance, during the early Cold War period, Hollywood studios produced films designed to instil a sense of threat from communist spies. The geopolitical role of Hollywood even increased with the widespread availability of films¹². Films like *Black Hawk Down* (2001)¹³, filled with pathos and American patriotism, serve to glorify American military operations while simultaneously shaping perceptions of American military involvement abroad. In the emerging information age, as Potulski writes, media influence is far more effective than coercion, yielding better results with far-

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington – Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1992.

⁹ Sean Carter, Derek P. McCormack, *Film, geopolitics and the affective logics of intervention*, in “Political Geography”, Vol. 25, 2006, no. 2, pp. 228-245.

¹⁰ Yves Lacoste, *An Illustration of Geographical Warfare. Bombing of the Dikes on the Red River, North Vietnam*, in “Antipode”, vol. 5, 1973, no. 2, p. 1.

¹¹ Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics*, New York, Routledge, 2009.

¹² See Sophie Harman, *Seeing Politics. Film, Visual Method, and International Relations*, Montreal – London – Chicago, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019.

¹³ Ridley Scott (director), *Black Hawk Down*, USA, Warner Bros., 2001.

reaching impacts. According to the researcher, this means that the use of soft power is more effective than the application of hard power¹⁴.

Contemporary geopolitics places significant emphasis on the role of mass media in analysing how dominant geopolitical imaginations (referred to as dominant geopolitical knowledge) are constructed and represented. It is recognized that feature films, among other media forms, “produce” the geography of global politics and international relations intended for mass consumption. The power of mass media lies in their accessibility, and moreover, media often provide a more visually engaging form of explaining international phenomena¹⁵, which is significantly easier to comprehend than the traditional explanatory methods used by international relations theorists¹⁶. Thus, the role of feature films in shaping both historical and contemporary collective imaginations is invaluable.

FILM ANALYSIS

Cultural texts in which the aforementioned geopolitical codes related to the Cold War can be found include feature films, documentaries, literature, comics, and painting. A comprehensive analysis and discussion of all these forms would be impossible due to their extent. Therefore, out of necessity, I have decided to focus solely on feature films. I have selected only those productions that were created after the fall of communism to avoid the accusation of analysing propaganda materials produced during the previous period. The choice of Polish productions is based on the ability to decode the information contained in these cultural contexts and the fact that a significant portion of Polish films addressing the Cold War theme concerns the image of Central and Eastern Europe, which largely reflects the image of Poland and the regions of its historical and cultural influence. I am fully aware that this is only a preliminary contribution to a broader understanding of the geopolitical codes related to the Cold War in the wider context of culture and art, which I hope will inspire other researchers to expand the scope of these analyses.

Not all the films discussed can be considered prestigious. However, their selection for my analysis was not influenced by financial costs or distribution

¹⁴ Jakub Potulski, *Geopolityka w świecie ponowoczesnym* [Geopolitics in the Postmodern World], Częstochowa, Instytut Geopolityki, 2011, p. 151-154.

¹⁵ Brandon Valeriano, *Teaching Introduction to International Politics with Film*, in “Journal of Political Science Education”, Vol. 9, 2013, no. 1, pp. 52-72.

¹⁶ Jakub Potulski, *Geopolityka*, p. 154-155.

reach, but by the clearly embedded geopolitical codes, which deserve scholarly deconstruction.

The places and times of the action in the films under analysis are highly symbolic for Cold War struggles. Czechoslovakia, following the intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops, Legnica as the headquarters of the Northern Group of Forces of the Warsaw Pact, and other discussed locations are incredibly important as codes and symbolic geopolitical markers present in popular consciousness and culture. Operating with these locations and combining them with other Cold War symbols can be considered extremely important from the perspective of building mental maps in the minds of viewers from Central and Eastern Europe. In this way, the creators of these films themselves become, in a sense, geopolitical agents, promoting specific geopolitical codes in the mass imagination of the audience.

Akwarium (Aquarium) was produced in two versions: full-length cinema film and a television series. Both versions centre on the themes of friendship and betrayal. The television version, which is closer to the literary original, is divided into four episodes¹⁷. It is a psychological spy drama that goes beyond merely reconstructing the life of the author of the novel on which the screenplay is based. It primarily serves as a study of the methods employed in the upbringing and formation of individuals working within a totalitarian empire. It also examines a system based on camouflage and provocation.

The protagonist of the film is perpetually uncertain whether the tasks assigned to him are genuine or merely tests conducted by his superiors. He is required to follow every order without question. Even showing emotions is considered a betrayal, as an individual guided by feelings is deemed a threat to the system. Consequently, after betraying his protector and friend, the protagonist faces an inevitable and numbing injection, evacuation to Moscow, and a brutal sentence.

The film also narrates a story of friendship and betrayal. The male friendship that develops between the protagonist and his superior – an idol – ends in disaster. The protagonist, carrying out his orders without hesitation, betrays his protector, leading him into the clutches of a ruthless system. This betrayal and the accompanying guilt prompt the protagonist to flee. In hiding in the forest to avoid evacuation to Moscow, he conducts a moral evaluation of his life. Risking his life, he surrenders to the British authorities. For betraying the organization, he is

¹⁷ Antoni Krauze (director) *Akwarium* [Aquarium], Telewizja Polska, 1996; Idem (director), *Akwarium, czyli samotność szpiega* [Aquarium, or the Loneliness of a Spy], Telewizja Polska, 1999 (series).

sentenced to death in his homeland¹⁸.

The expanded series *Akwarium* fundamentally maintains the thematic style and narrative techniques of Krauze's previous works, staying true to his exploration of psychological depth and moral complexity¹⁹. *Akwarium* is a psychological spy film based on the renowned, largely autobiographical book by Viktor Suvorov, the pseudonym of a man who, at 21, participated in the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia. After training with the Spetsnaz and completing the Military Diplomatic Academy, Suvorov embarked on a distinguished career as an officer in the Soviet GRU military intelligence. In 1978, he sought political asylum in the UK and was sentenced to death in absentia by the USSR. Beyond *Akwarium*, he authored several other books, including: *The Liberators: My Life in the Soviet Army*, *Inside the Soviet Army*, *Inside Soviet Military Intelligence*, *Spetsnaz. The Story Behind the Soviet SAS*, *Devil's Mother*²⁰.

Antoni Krauze, in an interview, emphasized that his film is not a grand spectacle but rather a psychological drama and a moral reckoning with the system, noting its departure from the James Bond archetype, highlighting that agents in the book and film are portrayed differently from the iconic 007. Initially, it seemed unlikely that *Akwarium* would be adapted by Poles, as the film rights were long held by Americans. It remains unclear why no American studio pursued the adaptation for ten years – perhaps due to the stereotypical action film

¹⁸ *Akwarium. Film fabularny* [Aquarium. Feature movie], in <https://www.filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=126115> [Accessed on 2.06.2024]

¹⁹ Throughout his career, Antoni Krauze established himself as a master of psychological cinema, often drawing inspiration from literature, as demonstrated by his 1970 debut *Monidło*, which preserved the literary intimacy of its source and was praised for its keen observation, biting irony, and satire, while showcasing his ability to find hidden talents in actors. Subsequent works like *Palec boży* [The Finger of God], *Strach* [Fear], *Podróż do Arabii* [Journey to Arabia], *Prognoza pogody* [The Weather Forecast], and *Dziewczynka z hotelu Excelsior* [The Girl from the Excelsior Hotel] reinforced his artistic reputation, marked by a meticulous exploration of human actions and motivations, a hallmark also evident in his successful documentary films such as *Czyny czy rozmowy* [Actions or Conversations] and *Preisner, czyli droga do sukcesu* [Preisner, or the Path to Success]. See *Antoni Krauze*, in <https://www.filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?osoba=111955> [accessed on 02.06.2024]

²⁰ Viktor Suvorov, *The Liberators: My Life in the Soviet Army*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1981; Idem, *Inside the Soviet Army*, New York, Macmillan Publishing, 1982; Idem, *Inside Soviet Military Intelligence*, New York, Macmillan Publishing, 1984; Idem, *Aquarium*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1985; Idem, *Spetsnaz. The Story Behind the Soviet SAS*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1987; Idem, *Devil's Mother*, Sofia, Fakel Express, 2011.

preferences of American audiences, who might not have embraced the nuanced cultural differences presented in *Akwarium*. Hollywood screenwriters began to seek new embodiments of evil, such as international terrorism, to stay relevant with the evolving historical context²¹.

Genius loci in the film encompasses two distinct geographical and political areas:

a) The East – including Moscow (e.g., the Kremlin), the Ukrainian SSR (Lviv, Kyiv, and an unspecified military base), and Chişinău;

b) The West – Vienna and West Germany (FRG).

Several geopolitical codes can also be identified. The first is the invasion of Czechoslovakia, referenced in a scene where Witek, asked by Gienek if he has been abroad, mentions Czechoslovakia in 1968. This shorthand implies involvement in Brezhnev's Doctrine during Operation Danube and paradoxically suggests that a Soviet citizen found it easier to leave the country as part of an "invasion" than for tourism.

Another code is nationalism in Soviet republics. In a conversation between Colonel Krawcov and Viktor, Krawcov mentions that the KGB reported to the Kremlin that it had handled Moldovan nationalism. Viktor is tasked with writing a message in the Moldovan language on the wall of an institute in Chişinău to demonstrate that separatism persists and that the GRU's rival did not succeed.

Lastly, throughout Krauze's production, there is a continuous theme of "conflict and rivalry" not only between Western and Eastern intelligence agencies but also between the GRU and the KGB, revealing that the USSR is not a monolithic entity.

Mała Moskwa (Little Moscow) is a feature film and a serial movie²². A former Soviet military pilot, Jura, returns to Legnica after over thirty years to visit his late wife Wiera's grave, accompanied by Wiera's adult daughter. They embark on this journey to confront the traumatic past linked to the dramatic events of their lives. In 1967, Jura, a young pilot and aspiring cosmonaut, was assigned to "Little Moscow," the largest Soviet military base in Eastern Europe. His young wife, the beautiful Wiera, accompanied him to Legnica, where she immersed herself in Polish culture, winning a Polish-Soviet singing competition. During this time, she meets Michał, a Polish officer and musician, and a forbidden love develops. As the

²¹ *Akwarium, czyli samotność szpiega* [Aquarium, or the Loneliness of a Spy], in <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=127270> [Accessed on 02.06.2024]

²² Waldemar Krzystek (director), *Mała Moskwa* [Little Moscow], Polska, Scorpion Art., Syrena Films, 2008.

Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia begins in 1968, Jura must conduct combat flights over Prague while Wiera and Michał's child is born. Wiera decides to leave Jura, marry Michał, and apply for Polish citizenship. The military authorities react swiftly, ordering Jura and his family to return to the USSR, but Wiera mysteriously disappears and is later found dead by suicide. Years later, Jura and Wiera's daughter revisit abandoned sites linked to their past, including a former military hospital and cemetery, and as the daughter faces her true father, she begins to grapple with her pain and hatred towards the world²³.

The four-part television version of Waldemar Krzystek's film, which won the Golden Lions at the 2008 Gdynia Polish Film Festival for the theatrical release of *Mała Moskwa*, also received awards for Best Actress and two special awards from TVP. *Mała Moskwa* was further distinguished with five Polish Film Awards (Orły), including for Best Script, Best Scenography, and Best Costumes. This collection of the most prestigious accolades in Polish cinema for *Mała Moskwa* provoked varied reactions and divided critics. Some reviewers considered the Gdynia jury's decision scandalous, arguing that Krzystek had produced a melodramatic, old-fashioned film with narrative and cinematographic techniques reminiscent of cinema from several decades past. Supporters of *Mała Moskwa* argued that it is a film for people, not critics, lauding it as a brilliantly executed, significant epic portrayal of forbidden love in the People's Republic of Poland and the oppression of the individual in a totalitarian system. It is worth noting that Soviet (and later Russian) forces were stationed in Poland for nearly half a century, with Legnica housing the largest Soviet Army garrison in Poland. In the 1960s, soldiers and civilians stationed there comprised nearly half of the city's population, which was then known as "Little Moscow"²⁴.

The *genius loci* in *Mała Moskwa* is represented by Legnica (including the train station, the Soviet town, the cultural centre, and the cemetery), while the geopolitical codes include: the Soviet cosmonaut, the headquarters of the Northern Group of Soviet Forces in Europe, and the presence of Soviet soldiers in Poland. Poland is depicted as the "happiest barrack in the camp," with the stationing of Soviet troops there presented as a sort of attraction.

Geopolitical codes can also be found in comedic representations, exemplified by *Operation Danube*²⁵. In August 1968, during the invasion (or,

²³ *Mała Moskwa* [Little Moscow], in <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=1219976> [Accessed on 06.06.2024]

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Jacek Głomb (director), *Operacja Dunaj* [Operation Danube, Poland, Czech Republic], in

according to some, the “friendly” intervention) of Warsaw Pact troops into Czechoslovakia, a Polish tank named “Biedroneczka” [“ladybug”] went missing. This event happened during the invasion. The further humorous adventures of the film’s characters have no factual basis. The crew get lost, and as if that weren’t enough, they “park” in an unexpected location... Will the four armoured crew complete their mission? Will they fall in battle against the hostility of Czech “friends” and the beauty of Czech girls? Communist troops cross the Czechoslovak border. The crew of the Polish tank gets lost and ends up in a rural inn. The *genius loci* include: Karpniki near Jelenia Góra, Modlin Fortress, and Czechia (Sobotka). Geopolitical codes: The tank crew getting lost reflects real situations where the Czechs deliberately used disinformation to make Warsaw Pact tanks lose their way (e.g., on the streets of Prague).

In the film, several monologues of soldiers from the People’s Polish Army contain Cold War geopolitical codes, hidden within propagandistic messages. These can be interpreted as a threat to the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia due to revisionism from the Federal Republic of Germany. Until 1970, when the FRG signed the treaty recognizing the Oder–Neisse line, Poles were warned about the West’s non-recognition of the Potsdam agreements. In this discourse, the borders of Central and Eastern Europe appear unstable, threatened by the youngest NATO member at the time, West Germany in the 1960s.

Jack Strong is a film about Ryszard Kukliński – a man who, while being at the heart of the system, undertakes a solitary battle against the Soviets. Through his determination, he begins a years-long cooperation with the CIA. From then on, his and his family’s lives are at risk, and one careless move could lead to tragedy. Colonel of the People’s Polish Army, Ryszard Kukliński begins cooperating with the CIA. Operating under the pseudonym Jack Strong, he provides the Americans with information about the Warsaw Pact²⁶.

As Łukasz Myszynski writes, “Although almost a quarter of a century separates the debut of ‘Kroll’ and ‘Jack Strong,’ in Władysław Pasikowski’s films, the stakes are still the same. Consistently, what matters are honour, principles, loyalty, and male friendship.” To the still relevant question of who Colonel Kukliński was, Pasikowski answers the viewer that he was a hero. Although he broke his military oath by passing immeasurable highly classified information

Film Praha, Odra Film, Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych i Fabularnych [Film Prague, Film Oder, Documentary and Feature Film Studio], 2009.

²⁶ *Jack Strong*, in <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=1231335> [Accessed on 06.06.2024]

about the Warsaw Pact to the US intelligence, he did so, as the prosecution concluded in acquitting him, in a state of “higher necessity,” since the world was on the brink of a nuclear pandemonium, which would probably have first claimed Poland as a victim. Moreover, this happened at a time when the homeland was dependent on the USSR, and Polish soldiers could not even fire a symbolic shot without Moscow’s consent.

I disagree with Myszyński’s claim that *Jack Strong* has little to do with politics, that “it is primarily a neatly crafted spy thriller drawing heavily from the classics of the genre, especially the novels of John le Carré.” According to the critic, “Claustrophobic interiors emphasize the drama and oppression of the situation in which the isolated, paranoia-ridden Kukliński found himself. The only person who knows the hero’s secret is the CIA agent handling him, played by Patrick Wilson, the star of ‘The Conjuring’ and ‘Watchmen.’ Over time, a bond of understanding develops between these two men who have so far lived on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain.” The film is replete with declarations and discourses on geopolitics. Conversely, according to Hubert Orzechowski, Władysław Pasikowski in *Jack Strong* does not exhaust the potential of Colonel Kukliński’s story. In his opinion, the screenwriters decided to show as much as possible while fitting it into less than 2 hours, making the film extremely successful in terms of cutting storylines. The main character is portrayed as a normal person in an extremely difficult and stressful situation. He often hesitates and is on the verge of breaking down – so much so that he almost blows his cover. The director of *Psy* presents three important aspects of Kukliński’s fate in *Jack Strong*: how his espionage work affects his relationship with his family, the friendship between the Pole and his CIA handler David Forden, and Kukliński’s activities under the noses of the Security Service and the KGB. According to the reviewer, the film will certainly appeal to ardent supporters of Kukliński in the country²⁷. According to historian Patryk Pleskot, it is worth watching the film, although it distorts the facts²⁸.

For my analysis, however, more important than the facts are the *genius loci* (Legnica (steelworks), Warsaw, Gdańsk, Moscow, Washington) and the

²⁷ Hubert Orzechowski, „*Jack Strong*” *wcale nie taki mocny* [*Jack Strong* is not that strong], in <https://www.newsweek.pl/kultura/jack-strong-recenzja-pasikowski-kuklinski-newsweekpl/yj5v88e> [accessed on 06.06.2024]

²⁸ See more in the Patryk Pleskot interview *Tajemnice „Jacka Stronga”* [Secrets of *Jack Strong*] for the portal *Pamięć.pl*, in <http://www.polska1918-89.pl/pdf/tajemnice-jacka-stronga,1410.pdf> [Accessed on 07.06.2024]

geopolitical codes contained in Pasikowski's film. One of the geopolitical codes of the Cold War depicted in the film are border checkpoints. These can pertain to both the occupation zones in Berlin (e.g., Checkpoint "Charlie"), state borders, and control checkpoints in crisis situations (martial law in the People's Republic of Poland). Maps play an important role in the film. They symbolize the strategic game that Colonel Kukliński got involved in. As props, they serve as an illustration of the Cold War. I would like to point out that in one scene, there is a map showing Warsaw Pact forces penetrating Western European countries (to the FRG, Denmark, Belgium). In 2005, a Soviet military plan from 1979 titled "Seven Days to the River Rhine" was declassified. It assumed, among other things, a NATO nuclear strike on bridges over the Vistula River, which would prevent reinforcements from being sent from deep within the USSR. The filmmakers utilize the awareness of the existence of this plan, which Kukliński undoubtedly had, and who, fearing nuclear destruction of his homeland, allegedly betrayed for the Americans. Soviet planners estimated that because of a NATO nuclear attack, about 2 million Poles would die, and Poland would be destroyed.

The action of the film *Zimna wojna (Cold War)* takes place in Poland, Yugoslavia, Berlin, and Paris in the 1950s and 1960s²⁹. Zula is a young dancer, while Wiktor is a pianist. The couple is first brought together by fascination, then by love, which ultimately will be interrupted by the prose of life³⁰. A talented composer falls in love with a young member of a folk ensemble. However, their great love is hindered by the realities of the post-war communist bloc³¹.

A distinctive geopolitical code for Central and Eastern Europe was the image of Joseph Stalin, which appeared in landscapes from the Volga to the Elbe. The *genius loci* are Poland, France, Yugoslavia, Germany. The image of Germany is that of a transitional zone. We can observe a border checkpoint in West Berlin, which the main character crosses while seeking political asylum. Yugoslavia is depicted as a border country where two spheres of influence met during the Cold War. In the 2018 film, however, it appears as a "danger zone" because the main character is forcibly thrown into a car that takes him straight to the station. He is handed a ticket, so it can be said that this is a forced deportation. The SFRY (Socialist Federal

²⁹ Paweł Pawlikowski (director) *Zimna wojna. Polska, Francja, Wielka Brytania* [Cold War] Poland, France, Great Britain], Apocalypso Pictures, 2018.

³⁰ *Zimna wojna* [Cold War], in <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=1242600> [accessed on 30.06.2024]

³¹ *Zimna wojna* [Cold War], in <https://www.filmweb.pl/film/Zimna+wojna-2018-764039> [accessed on 30.06.2024]

Republic of Yugoslavia) services operate flawlessly and do not allow Western “surveillance,” even if it is only of a cultural dimension.

One of the most important films in my analysis will be Łukasz Kośmicki’s *Ukryta gra* (*The Coldest Game*)³². It is the early 1960s. At the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, American secret services kidnap the brilliant mathematician Joshua Mansky. This forgotten genius, who struggles with alcohol abuse, is to compete in a chess match against the Soviet champion Gavrylov in an international tournament in the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. However, the rivalry is just a cover for a spy game. When allies turn out to be enemies and it is unclear whom to really trust, Mansky must make a decisive move to prevent a nuclear conflict³³.

The Cold War took place on many fronts, some more spectacular than others. This term is inextricably associated with events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the construction of the Berlin Wall, the Korean War, and the détente process of the 1970s. From the less political aspects, when we think of the East–West rivalry, technological competition in space or the boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980 comes to mind. Speaking of sports, it too became a field of rivalry between the capitalist and socialist blocs. However, there were few fields where Soviet athletes met Americans in the finals. American hockey players did not match the Soviets, and Soviet players did not match American basketball players. Therefore, the author of these words would like to recall the field of competition that was chess, whose climax was the 1972 World Championship match in Reykjavik between American Bobby Fischer and Russian Boris Spassky. The royal game can be symbolic of the Cold War rivalry for yet another reason. Perhaps no other sport so closely resembles strategic struggles, where the pieces can symbolize armies and the squares, spheres of influence. Hence, frequent analogies to chess terminology in politics, such as castling, checkmating, or gambit³⁴.

An important geopolitical code in the film is chess, as a symbol of the geostrategic rivalry between the USA and the USSR. The very fact that the chess tournament takes place between an American and a Soviet grandmaster at the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw gives the game special significance. It

³² Łukasz Kośmicki (director), *Ukryta gra* [The Coldest Game], Poland, USA, Watchout Studio, 2019.

³³ *Ukryta gra* [The Coldest Game], in <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=1245696> [Accessed on 30.06.2024]

³⁴ See Radosław Domke’s review of Daniel Johnson’s book *White King and Red Queen*, London, Atlantic Books, 2007, 383 p., in “Studia Zachodnie”, 2013, vol. 15, p. 247.

is also an evident reference to the famous match from the 1970s between Fischer and Spassky, which has been relocated from Reykjavik to Central and Eastern Europe.

The image of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw frequently appears in the film. It is one of the icons of the Cold War and the Soviet sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, as it was a gift from the Soviet people to Poland. Its construction was completed in 1952, and the symbolic opening took place on July 22, the Day of the Rebirth of Poland, which itself is also a geopolitical code, as the July 22nd PKWN Manifesto, dependent on Moscow, emphasized the new, entirely Soviet-controlled borders of Poland. By losing the Eastern Borderlands, Poland became more of a Central European than an Eastern European state, although in the context of being “inserted” into the centre of the Eastern Bloc, it is more Eastern European.

Last but not least, it is *Pan T (Mr. T.)* directed by Marcin Krzyształowicz³⁵. Warsaw emerging from the post-war ruins in 1953 is a place where anything is possible. The omnipresent uncertainty, denunciations, and control are softened by vodka and good company, jazz can be heard in the church’s crypt, and a chance encounter in the restroom with First Secretary Bolesław Bierut might end in unexpected intoxication. All of this is familiar to a certain Mr. T. – a renowned writer who lives in a hotel for literary figures. He earns his living from tutoring a beautiful high-school student with whom he has a passionate affair. One day, a provincial boy moves into the neighbouring apartment, dreaming of a career in journalism. Mr. T. becomes his mentor and teacher. The protagonist’s life gains momentum when the authorities start suspecting him of nefarious intentions to blow up the Palace of Culture and Science, the alluring student shocks him with an unexpected confession, and the Security Office begins to monitor his every move. In this absurd reality, maintaining seriousness will be challenging³⁶.

In the film, the author’s literary fantasy involves the Palace of Culture and Science being blown up by unknown terrorists. Once again, the building appears as a Cold War object, a symbol of Poland’s despised dependence on the Soviet Union.

³⁵ Marcin Krzyształowicz (director), *Pan T [Mr. T.]*, Poland, Heliograf, 2019.

³⁶ *Pan T. [Mr T.]*, in <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?film=1249252> [Accessed on 30.06.2024]

CONCLUSIONS

Generally, all films that deal with Cold War-related topics, regardless of the year they were released, are ideologically biased, more subtly or more obviously so. This is a matter related to cultural geopolitics. Therefore, all unbiased readers must take into consideration and analyse the following questions posed by Colin Flint in his *Geopolitics*:

- Who were the enemies, the “bad guys,” depicted in these films?
- Did they represent (openly or covertly) the inhabitants of real, existing states, or rather other entities in geopolitical actions?
- Who were the “good guys”?
- What nationalities did the “good” and “bad” characters represent?
- What roles did people of different genders play in the films, and what geopolitical message does this convey?³⁷

The answers emerging from the material subjected to my analysis are quite straightforward. The “bad guys” are Russians, specifically communist dignitaries from the USSR, whether they are civilians or military personnel. The “good guys” are Americans and various defenders of democracy, in the Western sense of the term. They always represent the inhabitants of real American power centres. Russians and Poles are generally portrayed by actors of those nationalities, with a few exceptions such as Janusz Gajos, a Polish actor who plays a Soviet tailor. Interestingly, this actor also has roles as Russians, ranging from tsarist officers to Joseph Stalin himself³⁸.

The world of the Cold War remains predominantly masculinized. Women are cast in supporting roles that serve as a backdrop to the main narrative of the Cold War. They are more often victims of their partners’ military careers, such as Vera from *Mała Moskwa* or the wife in *Jack Strong*. The alluring singer in Kośmicki’s film also lacks a deeper personality, serving more as a prop in the form of an object of desire for a prominent musician. The Cold War world is a cold one dominated by stereotypical macho figures who prioritize their careers above all else.

³⁷ C. Flint, *Wstęp do geopolityki* [Introduction to Geopolitics], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2009, p. 107.

³⁸ In the latest Western production dedicated to chess during the Cold War, the series *The Queen’s Gambit*, the Soviet chess grandmaster is played by Marcin Dorociński (also known for portraying Russians). Thus, the Slavic aspect does not go without some significance in this context.

REFERENCES

1. Carter Sean, McCormack P. Derek, *Film, geopolitics and the affective logics of intervention*, in "Political Geography", Vol. 25, 2006, no. 2, pp. 228-245.
2. Domke Radosław, review on: Daniel Johnson, *White King and Red Queen*, London, Atlantic Books, 2007, 383 p., in "Studia Zachodnie", vol. 15, 2013.
3. Flint Colin, *Wstęp do geopolityki* [Introduction to Geopolitics], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2009.
4. Głomb Jacek (director), *Operacja Dunaj, Polska, Czechy* [Operation Danube, Poland, Czech Republic], in *Film Praha, Odra Film, Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych i Fabularnych* [Film Prague, Film Oder, Documentary and Feature Film Studio], 2009.
5. Jameson Fredric, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic. Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington – Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1992, 220 p.
6. Kośmicki Łukasz (director), *Ukryta gra* [The Coldest Game], Polska, USA, Watch out Studio, 2019.
7. Krauze Antoni (director), *Akwarium* [Aquarium], Polska, Telewizja Polska, 1996.
8. Krauze Antoni (director), *Akwarium, czyli samotność szpiega* [Aquarium, or the Loneliness of a Spy], Polska, Telewizja Polska, 1999 (serial).
9. Krauze Antoni (director), *Monidło*, Zespół Filmowy Tor, 1970.
10. Lach Zbigniew, Wendt Jan, *Geopolityka. Elementy teorii, wybrane metody i badania* [Geopolitics. Elements of Theory, Selected Methods and Research], Częstochowa, Instytut Geopolityki, 2010.
11. Lacoste Yves, *An Illustration of Geographical Warfare. Bombing of the Dikes on the Red River, North Vietnam*, in "Antipode", vol. 5, 1973, no. 2, pp. 1-13.
12. Muszyński Łukasz, *Szpieg na miarę naszych możliwości* [A spy to the best of our abilities], in <https://www.filmweb.pl/>
13. Pasikowski Władysław (director), *Jack Strong*, Polska, Scorpio Studio, 2014.
14. Pleskot Patryk, *Tajemnice "Jacka Stronga"* [Secrets of Jack Strong], in <http://www.polska1918-89.pl/pdf/tajemnice-jacka-stronga,1410.pdf>
15. Potulski Jakub, *Geopolityka w świecie ponowoczesnym* [Geopolitics in the Postmodern World], Częstochowa, Instytut Geopolityki, 2011.
16. Shapiro J. Michael, *Cinematic Geopolitics*, London – New York, Routledge, 2009, 194 p.

17. Sobczyński Marek, *Zmiany polityczne, terytorialne i spory graniczne w Europie środkowo-Wschodniej po 1989 r.* [Political, territorial changes and border disputes in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989], in Piotr Eberhardt (ed.), *Studia nad geopolityką XX wieku* [Studies on the Geopolitics of the 20th Century], Warszawa, IG PZ PAN, 2013.

18. Valeriano Brandon, *Teaching Introduction to International Politics with Film*, in "Journal of Political Science Education", Vol. 9, 2013, no. 1, pp. 52-72.