

CHAPTER 9

Barbara Sass: the Author of Women's Films

EWA MAZIERSKA

Barbara Sass (b. 1936) is one of the best-known female directors in Poland. She gained this position in a very short period of time: her debut *Bez miłości* (*Without Love*, 1980) made her famous practically overnight. Since then she has been a continuous presence in Polish cinema, although many of her subsequent films were strongly criticised by critics and failed to achieve a larger audience. However, even the most ardent critics of her work admit that Sass has managed to find a niche in Polish cinema, thanks to her consistency in choosing certain topics and problems, as well as to her loyalty to certain actresses, especially Dorota Stalińska and Magdalena Cielecka, who became stars largely thanks to playing in her films.

Sass's road to filmmaking was also one of the most difficult amongst Polish directors. According to her own words, she started shooting films when she was only seventeen and still at secondary school (Śnieg-Czaplewska 1999: 64). In 1960 she began working as an assistant director and since then she has worked with such well-known directors as Andrzej Wajda and Wojciech Jerzy Has. Yet it took her twenty years to become an independent director of feature films; by the time *Without Love* reached an audience, she was already forty-four. Shortly after her debut she confessed in interviews that being a 'well-behaved woman' was a major obstacle in persuading appropriate people that she was able to make feature films independently (see Zygmunt, 1989a). It was only when she started to behave as a man that she gained the respect of her colleagues and the funds to make her first film (ibid.) Unlike Jakubowska, Sass was not helped by politics, but one should mention one factor that could have facilitated her road to cinema and aided her through her career: being married to one of

the best Polish cinematographers, Wiesław Zdort, who worked with Sass in almost all of her films.

More than any of her women colleagues, Sass is labelled a director of films about and for women, even a feminist. Indeed, she showed more interest in women than any other Polish film director; women are the principal characters in almost all of her films and she often depicts their experiences from their point of view. However, it must be added that Sass's cinema is by no means homogenous, whether in terms of characters, setting, ideology or visual style. We can discern in her work two distinctive strands. In one, which coincides with the early part of her career, she is mainly concerned with the position of women in contemporary Polish society. In the second strand she chooses women from earlier epochs as her main characters, and represents them as melodrama heroines. Melodramas prevail in the second part of her professional life, which is on the whole more versatile. The films dominating these two strands will form the principal material of my discussion, whose overall purpose is to establish whether Sass is indeed a feminist.

Looking for One's Own Place in Contemporary Poland

The first three films of Sass – *Without Love*, *Debiutantka* (*Debutante*, 1981) and *Krzyk* (*Scream*, 1982) – are often treated as a coherent whole due to such factors as being produced in a short span of time, set in the time concurrent to their production (beginning of the 1980s), having the same actress (Dorota Stalińska) in the main part, and their preoccupation with social issues, especially attitudes and reactions of an individual to the flaws and injustices of the political system in Poland. Due to their social sensitivity, as well as their realistic, almost documentary style – marked, for instance, by extensive location shooting on the streets, in real hospitals, factories and restaurants, a style reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s films of such directors as Krzysztof Kieślowski and Agnieszka Holland – they are often regarded as late examples of the Cinema of Moral Concern (Bren 1986: 159, 161; Kurz 1999: 37). The director herself contests this classification, regarding them as ‘psychological dramas’, albeit set in precisely defined social contexts (Maniewski 1996: 6).

Without Love (Figure 9.1) is set in the last period of ‘real socialism’, when open rebellion against the political authorities had not yet begun, but criticism of the many malaises poisoning social life was widespread. This criticism was directed both against the anonymous, ineffective and corrupt system and against those people who exchanged their moral integrity for more tangible goods: money, high positions, fame. The ‘moral concern’, to which directors like Kieślowski, Holland or Kijowski devoted their films in the 1970s, resulted from the dilemma, experienced particularly strongly by



Figure 9.1 Małgorzata Zajączkowska as Marianna and Dorota Stalińska as Ewa in *Bez miłości* (*Without Love*), 1980, dir. Barbara Sass © Studio Filmowe 'Kadr'

the Polish intelligentsia: to remain honest by opposing the system and the people who perpetuated it, or to 'sell one's soul' to achieve a better life.

In common with many characters in the Cinema of Moral Concern, Ewa in *Without Love* works in the media, which in the 1970s was regarded as a litmus test of one's political views and personal honesty. Her goal is to become a famous investigative journalist. She also claims that in her journalistic work she is driven by social concern, and intends to denounce corruption and incompetence in social life. Initially Ewa succeeds, securing a permanent post in a magazine, being chosen by her boss to write about topical subjects and offered a scholarship to Italy. However, in pursuing these noble objectives she increasingly uses less than noble methods, which put a question mark over her integrity. Ewa does not mind arranging things in bed, seducing men who are useful to her career, which can be regarded as the kind of corruption she condemns in her journalistic work, and is not shy about sacrificing an innocent individual to write about a 'larger issue'. Testimony to that is her publishing an article about Marianna (Małgorzata Zajączkowska), a young working-class woman who came to Warsaw from the provinces, looking for a better life, but found only a miserable existence in a hostel for factory workers and soon became pregnant. In order to get her piece onto the front page, Ewa included Marianna's picture, which resulted in Marianna's attempt at suicide and the loss of her baby. After this

event Ewa's fortunes change for the worse. She is held responsible for this act, disgraced by her colleagues and loses her chance to go to Italy. Lost, lonely and suffering qualms of conscience, she turns to alcohol.

The ending of *Without Love* confirms the opinions of various men who criticised Ewa for her ruthlessness and warned her of the possible perilous consequences of her deeds. By extension, it vindicates the patriarchy that Ewa opposed both in her professional and private life. However, largely through the use of *mise-en-scène* and music Sass reveals various extenuating circumstances for Ewa's behaviour, making the viewer sympathise with the discourse which she embodies in the film. In particular, Sass shows that in Poland of that time one could not act completely honestly, if one wanted to do something good for the country, or for oneself. Ewa's male colleagues, who either because of a higher morality or simple laziness, do not attempt to access the places which she reaches, are unable to write interesting articles. Her difficult situation results also from her gender. All higher positions in Ewa's magazine are occupied by men; female journalists are reduced to making coffee for them. Similarly, men dominate the factories and hospitals; for example, the attendant in the hostel for female factory workers is male and he exercises his power over the women with an air of superiority. Consequently, the viewer is led to believe that moral integrity is a luxury which career women in Poland can not afford. Even Ewa's instrumental and cynical attitude to men, her belief that a woman cannot risk falling in love, if she wants to make something of herself, is partly excused as resulting from her previous bad experiences with men. She once lived in Rome and fell in love with an Italian press magnate. He seemed to reciprocate her affection, but abandoned her when she became pregnant, which drew her to alcoholism.

Ewa's small daughter features in the narrative, but she plays only a minor role in her life. She is looked after by her grandmother and sees her own mother rarely. Yet, Ewa refuses to feel guilty for having other priorities in life than motherhood. She even attempts to instil in her child the same moral 'vices' which she possesses, such as selfishness and strength. The soundtrack, consisting of sentimental music by Seweryn Krajewski and Italian pop, which Ewa listens to continuously and mementoes from Italy,¹ which decorate her flat, together convey the impression that deep in her heart Ewa remains a sensitive woman, able to love, and that it is the man's fault that such perfect material for a romantic heroine is wasted.

Debutante, which is set during the shipyard strikes in 1980, also features a very ambitious woman, who, like her predecessor in *Without Love*, is called Ewa. She is a graduate in architecture from Warsaw, who takes up an offer to work with a famous architect called Jerzy (Andrzej Łapicki) on the project of a sea museum, to be built on the Baltic coast: the arena of most dramatic events in this period. In common with Ewa in *Without Love* her work and private life are intertwined, although in a different way. Ewa the

journalist unashamedly used men to achieve professional advantages; Ewa the architect sacrifices her ambition for love. The romance begins when her employer persuades her to move into his house in the country on the pretext that the project needs their close collaboration. She agrees despite being warned by another woman that he uses women for his own goals and discards them when they cease to be useful. The same fate appears to await Ewa: the work regime in Jerzy's house makes her sick from tiredness, and being one of the three women competing for the architect's attention – he lives with his wife Bożena (Bożena Adamkówna) and his secretary Maria (Elżbieta Czyżewska), who is also his lover – puts her in an uncomfortable position. Furthermore, life and work with Jerzy separates her from outside reality, even thwarts her political interests and opinions. In common with many people of her generation, Ewa opposes the communist regime. On her arrival at the coast she addresses the Solidarity conspirators, who put up the posters, 'I am with you.' However, by allowing Jerzy to dominate her life, she inevitably succumbs to his views that politics should be left to politicians and ordinary people should limit themselves to work: a view which was convenient to the communist authorities and which was profoundly challenged by the Solidarity movement. Furthermore, when the people whom Jerzy employs in his design office show an unwillingness to carry on working, because they have not been paid for many weeks, and because, as one of them puts it, 'the country needs houses and crèches, not symbols, such as the sea museum which Jerzy designs' (and which is commissioned by the government), Ewa appeals to them to continue working out of loyalty to their boss, ignoring their arguments. In the end, after he gets drunk at a party and attempts to rape her, she leaves Jerzy and tries to persuade Maria and Bożena to do the same. At this stage it is clear that the museum will never be built, and Ewa's work and devotion would be wasted. Yet, living with Jerzy and his women was not in vain, as she gained knowledge about men. The slight smile on her lips, when she boards the train back to Warsaw, suggests that she will not be fooled again by a man, that she has gained a degree of autonomy. Hence, although *Debutante* is classified as melodrama, the happy ending in this film is not equated with finding love, but with discovering the possibility of life without romance.

The heroines of *Without Love* and *Debutante* are very mobile. They change where they live, as a result of getting a new job or finding a new lover, moving from Warsaw to the coast, or even to Italy, and from hotel or rented apartment to the flat of one's lover. They relish being on the move: Ewa in *Without Love* is so fascinated by distant, exotic journeys, that instead of taking her small daughter to a park, she takes her to an airport, where they observe departing planes. Although the price of constant mobility is the lack of any permanent place to live, Sass's heroines do not mind not having a home and keeping all their belongings in one bag or rucksack. By showing that private space does not mean much to her female characters,

Sass distances herself from the classical women's pictures, in which home is the central setting and an important factor, shaping women's identity (see Cook 1983). More importantly, she also deviates from the traditional ideal of Polish femininity, epitomised by the myth of the Polish Mother, which regarded home as the central value in the lives of women. Mobility, which the heroines in the traditional women's pictures rarely achieve, is typically recognised as a sign of their ability to overcome the constraints resulting from patriarchy and to shape their own fate (Hill 1999: 174–76). However, as Moya Luckett observes, while discussing women in 'Swinging London' films, mobility can also signify less attractive states: displacement, homelessness, confusion, lack of stable identity. It can be constraining, not liberating (Luckett 2000: 239–41). I will suggest that in the first two films Sass ignored the dangers connected with mobility, concentrating on their advantages. For example, women who cannot afford to be mobile, like Ewa's friend in *Without Love* who works as a doctor somewhere in the provinces, or Bożena and Maria in *Debutante*, who feel too powerless and frightened of the outside world to abandon Jerzy, complain about their constraint and are full of admiration for Ewa. Even men, who are usually sedentary, attached to their homes and their desks, envy these women their ability to move – they equate it with freedom and youth, which they have lost for ever. Sass shows that male immobility, not unlike that of women, is also largely the consequence of patriarchy: of having wives who do not work outside the home and of whom they must take care, albeit with reluctance.

Sass's choice of setting, as well as the construction of the female characters and their subsequent iconic status, encourage comparison of *Without Love* and *Debutante* with Wajda's diptych, *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron* (see Chapter 5). Both Ewa in *Without Love* and Agnieszka in Wajda's films work in the media and fight against the immoralities and absurdities of socialist reality. Yet, their moral trajectories are different. Agnieszka first wants to make an interesting film that will help her to achieve success as a director. Gradually, however, her career and even the film itself become secondary, as she is more committed to fighting for a better society. Ewa thinks more about her own advancement than of the welfare of her country. They also have different attitudes to love and sex. Agnieszka does not have sex with men whom she does not love, while Ewa often arranges things in bed. In common with Sass's female characters, Agnieszka is very mobile, travelling from Warsaw to the furthest parts of Poland. Yet, she eventually settles down, becoming a wife and mother in *Man of Iron*, even the Polish Mother, thus conforming to patriarchal rules of Polish society. By contrast, for Ewa in Sass's films there is never any stability either in a geographical or an emotional sense. One attempt to find success and happiness leads to another, the end of one eventful journey means the beginning of the next one.

There is no doubt that Wajda's character is more virtuous and dignified than Sass's heroines, who come across as selfish, at times even two-faced

towards those close to them, and dishonest with themselves – hence the question why Sass constructed her characters the way she did. It is impossible to give a full answer to this, although some factors are worth listing. Firstly, unlike Wajda, who in *Man of Iron* attempted to rediscover national myths, Sass remained faithful to the code of realism favoured by the directors of the Cinema of Moral Concern. In particular, she showed awareness of the corrupting nature of the communist system, the thin line between being on the side of ‘Them’ – those supporting the system – and ‘Us’ – the dissidents and conspirators. Secondly, unlike Wajda and other directors of the most distinguished Polish films about women of this period – most notably the director of *Matka Krolów* (*Mother of the Kings*, 1982), Janusz Zaorski, who represents female characters as being aware, as Ostrowska put it, that their tragedies are the realisation of ‘the collective lot of Polish women’ (Ostrowska 1998: 431) – Sass deprives her female protagonists of such knowledge. Thanks to that they are not perceived as participating in the preestablished order and their subjective field of choice feels greater than that of Agnieszka and Łucja Król in Zaorski’s film.

Scream, the third film of Sass with Dorota Stalińska in the main role, highlights to an even greater extent the socioeconomic problems facing Polish women in the final years of ‘real socialism’, and, consequently, their failure to occupy the high moral ground. The main character in this film, nicknamed Perełka, finds herself in an even more difficult situation than her predecessors, which is a consequence of her belonging to the working class or, more precisely, to the criminal margins of Warsaw’s poor Praga district. After being released from prison, she gets a job as a low-ranking nurse in a luxurious old people’s home. At this stage Perełka is homeless, as she is unwelcome in the shanty house where she previously stayed with her alcoholic mother and her lover, and there is no council accommodation available. Perełka’s fortune appears to change when she meets Marek (Krzysztof Pieczyński), a handsome male nurse, who lives in a converted barrack while awaiting a cooperative flat. She moves in with him and initially their romance flourishes, but eventually Marek abandons Perełka without any clear reason. Moreover, her dream of getting a flat disappears, when one of the apparently rich residents in the old people’s home refuses to lend her money to bribe the housing cooperative. She kills the old man, which can be read as a metaphorical revenge on all men who let her down, and utters an awful scream: a sign of her anger and desperation.

In common with Ewa in *Without Love* and *Debutante*, Perełka bursts with vitality and almost masculine strength but, unlike her educated predecessors who tried to employ these attributes to advance their careers, she uses them mainly to harm herself. The connotations of mobility also change in this film: here it signifies a lack of direction and above all homelessness, which makes Perełka completely dependent on men. Men, however, as Sass showed on previous occasions, do not fulfil women’s expectations, but

make them even more unhappy and powerless. This grim diagnosis of Perełka's situation can also be read as an indictment of the political system which abandons the most vulnerable. This system, however, is no longer 'real socialism', as *Scream* is set in 1981, shortly after the brief victory of Solidarity, when, as Krzysztof T. Toeplitz puts it, there were effectively two centres of political power: official (communist) and unofficial (Solidarity) (Toeplitz 1984: 65–66). Yet, in Sass's film the political change makes no real difference to Perełka's life. It can even be argued that in a sense she is a victim of the atmosphere of accusations, characteristic of these times. The man whom Perełka kills is suspected of being a prominent communist figure. If not for this false (as she later finds out) accusation, she might not have chosen him as her victim.

The historical moment in which the narrative of *Scream* is set and its depressing scenario of female life reminds us of *Kobieta samotna* (*A Woman Alone*, 1981) by Agnieszka Holland (see Chapter 10). In both films poor, working-class women are depicted as being completely powerless, disfranchised from wider society and even from their own families. In both they seek refuge in men and initially men promise them happiness and moral salvation, but in the end they are the cause of their total downfall. Moreover, both Sass and Holland associate their heroines' misery with the communist system, which contrary to its pro-working-class rhetoric, let down working-class people, especially women. In both films there is also a sense of pessimism connected with Solidarity; it seems that for 'a lonely woman', such as Irena in Holland's film or Perełka in *Scream*, the new social order will bring few advantages: they remain marginalised as they always were.²

The three films previously discussed established Sass and Stalińska as a unique and powerful team in the history of Polish cinema. They owe each other more than anybody else for the launching and strengthening of their careers. However, after completing *Scream* their professional cooperation and friendship disintegrated. Several years later Sass offered Stalińska one more principal role in a film – apparently at the request of the latter, who wanted to play in a film which in some way would document their stormy and multifaceted relationship. The result was *Historia niemoralna* (*Immoral Story*, 1990) (Figure 9.2): a film regarded as full of flaws by the critics, viewers and even the director herself, who claimed that she failed to represent the relationship between Stalińska and herself in a honest way, and instead limited the film's content to gossip (see Grzela 2000: 28–29). The main defect of this picture results from the unreconciled attempt to tell the story of Sass and Stalińska, and at the same time to convey – or at least to play with – the idea (almost taken for granted in the age of postmodernism) that cinema is not the domain of presentation and truth, but representation and falsity. The film takes the form of a film within a film: the director named Magda (Teresa Budzisz-Krzyżanowska) makes a film about



Figure 9.2 Dorota Stalińska in *Historia niemoralna* (*Immoral Story*), 1990, dir. Barbara Sass © Studio Filmowe 'Kadr'

her star, Ewa (Dorota Stalińska), and the main narrative device used by Sass is that of shooting two different versions – or at least two different endings – of the same event: one representing the actress in a better light, one in a worse, and subsequently editing them in a way that further undermines or twists the initial meaning of the events represented. The consequence is a lack of clarity about what Sass wants us to believe with regard to Stalińska's and her own personality, and her relationship with this actress. Despite that, however, we can detect in the film some motifs and issues that pertain to Sass's oeuvre as a whole and are symptomatic of the prevailing discourses on femininity in the period the film was made. Ewa and Magda are typical of Sass's heroines in the sense that, although they forge close relations with other women, they also pursue their affairs at the expense of the happiness of other females. Hence, the friendship between the film director and her actress is marred by their mutual disloyalty and competitiveness. For example, it is suggested that Magda was jealous of the award Ewa received at the festival for a role which she played in her film. At the same time Ewa showed Magda no gratitude for making her one of the most famous actresses of her generation. Also, in common with her predecessors in Sass's films, Ewa is represented as being very mobile. Her love of travelling is epitomised by her expensive Porsche, which she claims was a gift from her

father. In reality, after her father's death she almost stole it from her father's second wife, who inherited the whole of his estate. For Ewa the car means more than anything else in her life: only inside her Porsche can she forget about her numerous problems and feel free. The car is also an important part of her identity, confirming her status as a rich and famous woman, which she gradually loses in life. Mobility and vitality, however, not unlike the case of Perelka, are signs of Ewa's restlessness and lack of direction in life, rather than her freedom.

The differences between Ewa in *Immoral Story* and earlier heroines of Sass are as important as the similarities. The most significant is the fact that, unlike the other women in Sass's movies, who despite their numerous vices gained viewers' sympathy, Ewa is ultimately an anti-heroine. Her selfishness, arrogance, grandiose opinion of herself and contempt for those below her, combined with bad manners and bad taste (even her apparent talent is hardly visible in this film) and later her self-pity, do not allow us to like her, even less to identify with her. At times she comes across as totally immoral and repulsive.

Immoral Story was made in 1990, soon after the first democratic government was elected in Poland. The period which followed has been marked by the rise of masculinism and conservative attitudes to women (see Chapter 6). The career or 'liberated' woman, especially if childless, became one of the main victims of the new approach: the object of utter contempt and ridicule of right-wing politicians, Church officials and a large section of the media. The portrayal of Ewa is very much in tune with these negative opinions and images of women. Even the fact that Ewa has an abortion is represented negatively, as a testimony to her egoism and lack of responsibility. It seems to me that Sass not only noticed the new strength of patriarchy and masculinism in postcommunist Poland, but largely internalised it, or at least flirted with it.

Love is Everything

After completing her 'Trilogy' Sass made two films, *Dziewczęta z Nowolipki* (*Girls from Nowolipki*, 1985) and *Rajska jabłoń* (*Tree of Paradise*, 1985), based on the novels by Pola Gojawiczyńska of the same titles, published respectively in 1935 and 1937. Gojawiczyńska's books are renowned for their realistic depiction of the proletarian and petit bourgeois milieus of pre-Second World War Warsaw, which are represented from female perspectives. *Girls from Nowolipki* (Figure 9.3) and *Tree of Paradise* follow the lives of four friends: Franka, Bronka, Amelka and Kwiryna from the time they finished school till the death of two of them. They also contain a strong melodramatic element. These two qualities assured Gojawiczyńska's novels long-lasting popularity, particularly



Figure 9.3 A scene from *Dziewczęta z Nowolipki* (*Girls from Nowolipki*), 1985, dir. Barbara Sass © Studio Filmowe 'Kadr'

amongst female readers, testimony to which is the fact that before Sass turned to them, they had been twice adapted for cinema and television, respectively in 1937 by Józef Lejtes and 1975 by Stanisław Wohl, and their screen versions are regarded as very successful (Dondziłło 1978: 12; Mruklik 1986: 9–11).

The fact that *Girls from Nowolipki* and *Tree of Paradise* are regarded as respectable women's fiction partly explains why Sass, who established herself as a leading author of women's cinema, found in them attractive material for her own work. However, in the light of her previous preoccupation with contemporary reality, her interest in the past came as a surprise. There are several factors that explain this shift in interest. One was a general tendency amongst Polish directors, observed after the introduction of martial law in 1982, of choosing stories set in the past or the future as a way of avoiding contentious issues, or to present them less directly, and in this way evade heavy political censorship. Secondly, there was a rift between Sass and her muse, Dorota Stalińska, which encouraged the director to look for new types of female characters and subjects. Moreover, after Sass completed *Scream*, the critics and the director herself had a sense that she had exhausted a certain type of story, characters and ideas. Turning to literature was meant to alleviate these problems.

Gojawiczyńska depicts the eponymous girls from Nowolipki as strong, ambitious, honest and attractive women, who nevertheless fail to reach

their potential. Being an author of left-leaning persuasion and proto-feminist views, she accused the harsh, capitalist and (albeit to a smaller extent) sexist prewar reality for their downfall. Stanisław Wohl preserved and Józef Lejtes even strengthened in their adaptations of Gojawiczyńska's novels the idea that before the war a woman of poor background was sentenced to remain in her constraining and unattractive world. In Lejtes's film it was conveyed, for example, by the recurrent motifs of rapidly closed windows and doors, and the ugly, claustrophobic, inner courtyard to which the girls always return.

Sass conformed to the original narratives but, as Joanna Piątek observes, changed their ideology by putting emphasis on the psychology of the main characters and the role of fate in shaping their lives (Piątek 1986: 11). Fatalism is first revealed by Franka (Maria Ciunelis), the most gifted of the four girls, who dreams about a career as an actress. She tells her best friend, Bronka (Izabela Drobotowicz-Orkisz), 'Neither I nor you are able to close your eyes and "give in", disregarding people's views. Neither are we able to live properly, as others do. The latter life we find too vulgar, too ordinary, too stupid, too suffocating, the former: too clever, too hypocritical, too dishonest. If one enters life with such a "dowry" [of views] as we do, it is enough to end in the gutter.'

Franka becomes a prostitute after being raped by an actor whom she trusted, falls ill with typhus, has an affair with a rich, middle-aged married man and eventually commits suicide. The fate of her friends, Bronka and Amelka (Marta Klubowicz), are hardly any better. Bronka falls in love with her neighbour Ignacy (Krzysztof Kolberger) and her affection appears reciprocated. However, to fulfil his political ambitions he marries a rich and educated woman, while continuing to see Bronka. This solution makes her unhappy and after years of putting up with being only his mistress, she commits suicide. Amelka, persuaded by her mother, first has an abortion after becoming pregnant out of wedlock with her first lover, and soon marries the rich owner of a chemist's shop (Mariusz Dmochowski). She eventually kills him and confesses to her act, not so much out of remorse, but because she feels that there is no meaning in her life; she is haunted by the thought of her lost lover and child. Kwiryna (Ewa Kasprzyk) is the only girl who looks for success outside the private sphere. She inherits a run-down shop from her parents and changes it into a flourishing enterprise. However, she also loses in the end, as her thrift and greed drives a wedge between her and her altruistic husband, Roman (Piotr Bajor). His death from leukaemia, for which she partly blames herself, as initially she did not want to pay for a doctor, demonstrates that a life of professional success is for a woman little more rewarding than a life lived for love.

By emphasising romantic love – or, more precisely, the desire for such love and having a family as the main factors shaping women's lives – Sass distanced herself from Gojawiczyńska and the Polish model of melodrama

from the prewar period, which foregrounded sociocultural determinants of romantic love. More importantly, she contravened her own vision of women's place in society, revealed in her 'Trilogy', where the downfall of female characters resulted from a combination of factors that were historical and therefore changeable. Moreover, unlike women in *Without Love*, *Debutante* and *Scream*, who transformed internally under changing circumstances, learnt their lessons and moved on, characters in *Girls from Nowolipki* and *Tree of Paradise* remain the same. As a result, critics argued that they symbolise certain universal types of women, as opposed to historical women (Piątek 1986: 10; Zajdel 1986: 11).

While there is a significant difference in the way women are represented by Sass, men remained the same: selfish, insensitive and conformist. They might be economically and politically powerful, but their emotional impoverishment and almost autistic preoccupation with their own affairs make them unenviable figures. The only exception to this rule is Kwiryna's husband Roman, but his premature death erases him from the narrative, preventing him from making a greater impact on his surroundings.

Comparing the *mise-en-scène* in Sass's 'Trilogy' and her films based on Gojawiczyńska's novels underlines both the continuity and change in the director's representation of female characters. Women in *Girls from Nowolipki* and *Tree of Paradise* live in places that are dark and confining, and, with the exception of Kwiryna, they have little control over their space. Houses and rented rooms that they inhabit do not really belong to them, and their husbands and lovers leave a greater trace of their personalities on them than the women do. In this respect they are reminiscent of the places where heroines in Sass's earlier films lived. Yet, in contrast to them – particularly Ewas in *Without Love* and *Debutante*, who almost invaded public places, filling them with their loud voices and uncontrollable mobility – the girls from Nowolipki are very shy on the streets, in the offices, in the restaurants, even hiding from people's gaze. Such behaviour results partly from their low social status and partly from their unclear conscience: as prostitutes, mistresses or married women lusting after younger men they prefer to stay in the shadows. Their actual confinement is a reflection of their moral confinement. They are happiest in an open space, far from the city, close to nature; their joint excursion to the outskirts of Warsaw constitutes one of their rare moments of pure joy. Yet, such moments are very short and they only highlight the unhappiness of the rest of their existence. Fatalism is also conveyed in the film's symbolism, especially the recurring motif of an apple, standing for woman's appetite for love and sex and her eternal, sinful nature. For example, an apple falls on the pavement at the very moment Bronka throws herself under a car, giving the impression that women sin and are punished simply because they are females. Such symbolism, conveying the idea that women 'belong' to nature, which determines their fortune, hardly appeared in Gojawiczyńska's work; as

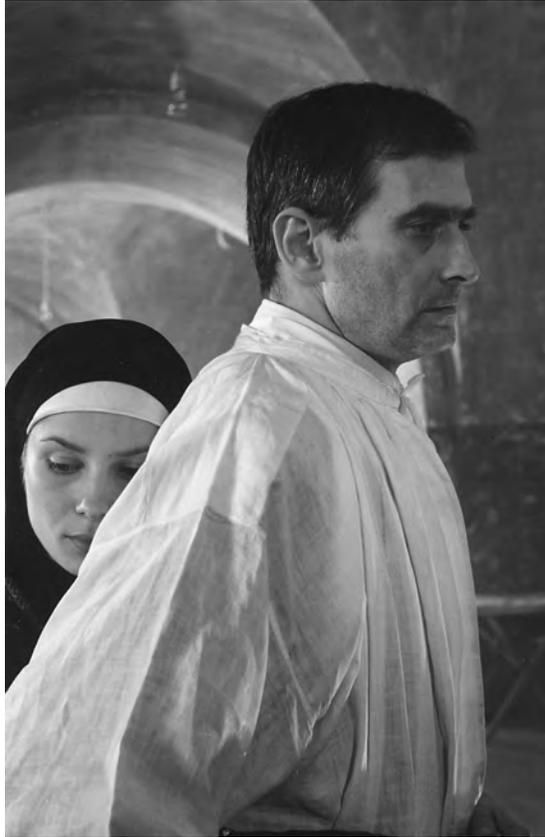


Figure 9.4 Magdalena Cielecka as Anna and Olgierd Łukaszewicz as a priest in *Pokuszenie* (*Temptation*), 1995, dir. Barbara Sass © Andrzej Stempowski

previously mentioned, she tended to foreground the sociopolitical components of women's position.

Many motifs present in *Girls from Nowolipki* and *Tree of Paradise* reappear in *Pokuszenie* (*Temptation*, 1995), regarded as Sass's best film of the last decade (Figure 9.4). Set in 1956, the last year of Stalinism in Poland, *Temptation* alludes to a true event, when the political authorities attempted to disempower and disgrace the charismatic leader of the Catholic Church in Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, first by imprisoning him, then by sending him a nun, who in reality was a secret service agent with a pseudonym Ptaszyńska, with the task of gaining information from him and seducing him. The authorities failed: the cardinal did not give in to the charms of his female companion, and after the death of the Stalinist leader of the Polish Communist Party, Bolesław Bierut, he left prison enjoying

greater respect amongst Polish Catholics than ever before. Sass was not the only director inspired by the story of Cardinal Wyszyński and Ptaszyńska. In 2000 another female director, Teresa Kotlarczyk, made *Prymas. Trzy lata z tysiąca* (*Primate. Three Years Out of a Thousand*). Her film examined the political and moral situation of the leader of the Catholic Church in Poland during his imprisonment against the background of Stalinism.

In her film Sass is less preoccupied with historical accuracy. Unlike Kotlarczyk, she does not use the real names of people and ignores many historical details. The political dimensions of the Wyszyński-Ptaszyńska affair and the views and emotions of the priest are pushed to the background, giving way to a psychological portrait of a young, sensitive woman, who unhappily falls in love. Sass's heroine, named Anna (Magdalena Cielecka), once worked as a maid for a priest (Olgierd Łukaszewicz) who later became very prominent. She was infatuated with him, but her love was not reciprocated. To be closer to her beloved priest, if not physically, then at least spiritually, Anna became a nun and subsequently she was sent to prison for encouraging schoolchildren to oppose communism. The authorities there tried to force her to work for the secret police, to spy on a high-ranking priest accused of an anti-government conspiracy. On her arrival in the military camp, far from civilisation, where the prominent priest is interned, Anna discovers that he is the same man with whom she had been in love. The old love is rekindled in Anna, and the priest himself seems to be tempted by the beautiful young nun, who is completely devoted to him. Yet, in the end he rejects her affection and, in a moment of deepest despair Anna denounces the priest, only to find out that it does not matter any more as the political situation in Poland has changed and the authorities are no longer interested in persecuting the Church.

In common with *Girls from Nowolipki* and *Tree of Paradise* Sass builds her film around the contrast between an imagined life of freedom and happiness and real confinement and misery. Firstly, there is the physical confinement of the camp imposed on its inhabitants by the political authorities. This confinement is suffered by both Anna and the priest, but Sass suggests that being brought up in the country, loving light and fresh air, she suffers more than he, who, as an intellectual, enjoys studying in a solitary cell. Anna's dream of freedom is conveyed by her constant looking through the windows and iron bars and her immense pleasure in observing nature around the camp: trees and animals, particularly birds, whom she also feeds. She herself can be described as a 'caged bird' (a metaphor used extensively in other films of Sass). However, the most painful confinement is psychological and largely self-imposed. Unlike physical imprisonment, this confinement is experienced only by Anna who, by falling in love with a man unable to reciprocate her feelings, and by entering a convent, sentences herself to constant erotic frustration and violation of the values which she promised to respect.

At the same time as exposing love as a destructive force in the life of the

heroine, the director exalts it. For example, the priest, quoting the Bible and using allegorical language, glorifies love as the only thing which matters in human life. He means primarily a pure, asexual love of God, but his words can also be applied to the love between humans. Anna herself does not bemoan her being a sexual creature, but only regrets entering the convent, as it prevents her from living in tune with her feminine side. On the whole, Anna is in a *nowin* situation. She would be doomed, if she gives up her love for the priest, because without love her life would be empty; but by loving him she sentences herself to neverending suffering. This situation reminds us of the circumstances of girls from *Nowolipki*. Although the priest, like the majority of men included in Sass's previous films, does not reciprocate the woman's affection, this time his inability to love does not make him a moral dwarf. He is 'saved' as a human being by his devotion to God and his service to people who oppose the communist regime; thanks to them he overcomes the temptations of the flesh and finds inner freedom.

The three films discussed in this part of the chapter are set decades before the time they were made, but in common with *Immoral Story* they reflect some changes in attitudes towards women that since the 1980s were revealed by various centres of political and moral authority, such as the state, Solidarity and the Catholic Church. The change consisted of foregrounding a woman's rights and duties resulting from her nature (or, more precisely, what was regarded by these institutions as 'woman's nature'), at the expense of recognising the variety of needs and interests of real, Polish women. Particularly in Solidarity and the Church's discourse on gender, emphasis was put on an 'ahistorical' woman, whose needs are to be fulfilled in the private sphere, as a wife and mother, as opposed to a man whose main role is to act in the public sphere and provide for his family. This return of patriarchy in the official sphere, sometimes regarded as a reaction against corrupting, Western influences on Polish culture, was greeted by women with mixed reactions. Some, particularly those close to feminism, regarded it as constraining and humiliating, because it sentenced them to second-class citizenship. Others, however, regarded it as a chance for gaining freedom from the pseudo-emancipation imposed on them from above, which was the norm in communist times, and which resulted in women's immense difficulty in achieving fulfilment in either the public or the private sphere (Molyneux 1994: 303–30).

It is plausible to suggest that the three films reflect an ambivalent attitude towards the concept of a woman as ahistorical, which was characteristic of Sass and many other Polish women in the 1980s and 1990s. The ambivalence results from the fact that, on the one hand, Sass embraces the notion that a woman is defined primarily by her natural instincts and desires, which culture can temporarily suppress, but cannot change. On the other hand, however, she draws the viewer's attention to the harms inflicted on historical women by accepting such a narrow definition of woman as 'eternal Eve', whose life gains meaning only through men and thanks to them.

Between Identification and Distant Sympathy: Spectatorship of Sass's Films

In order to answer the main question posed in this chapter, regarding Sass's allegiance to feminism, it is worth considering the spectatorship of her films. I am interested in the ways they assume certain responses from the viewers, their actual reactions, as well as the director's perception of her audience, conveyed in her interviews.

The spectator of Sass's films is addressed through a variety of discourses which often appear to be in conflict with each other. In her 'Trilogy' Sass places a female character in the centre of the narrative: she virtually never disappears from the screen. Moreover, she uses close-ups extensively, subjective shots and other means, suggesting that she intends to present reality from the point of view of the leading woman. The director herself described these films as 'psychological portraits' of strong, determined, young women and admitted that they were addressed mainly to a female audience, expecting the viewer to identify with the position of the central character (Maniewski 1996: 6). This position, as has been previously mentioned, is that of a loser: each film depicts the comprehensive downfall of a woman, comprising a failure in the professional, private and social life of which she herself is largely to blame. I suggest that at the level of narrative the films elicit masochistic identification with the doomed heroine or function as a warning against behaving like Ewa and Perełka (who in the Polish press were typically regarded as independent and liberated women). Asked in interviews why her films contain such gloomy endings, Sass typically replied that they simply reflect the pessimistic side of her personality; the optimistic one is mirrored in her theatre production (Zygmunt 1989b: 12). Without dismissing this explanation I will propose that the pessimism of Sass's narratives can be interpreted as a legacy of Polish Romanticism in her cinema. It is worth remembering here that she learnt filmmaking as an assistant of Andrzej Wajda and Wojciech Jerzy Has, who specialised in creating characters doomed to failure and whose tragedy was depicted as a testimony to their inner nobility.

Yet, in a different discourse, articulated through the appearance and acting of Dorota Stalińska, the films conveyed a different message: that it is acceptable, or even desirable, to act in the way her heroines acted and be selfish, arrogant, even cynical and disloyal. The reaction of young female viewers to *Without Love* at the time the film was first shown in cinema theatres suggested that Sass's heroines were regarded not as villains, but as role models, and their determination to win mattered to viewers much more than their eventual demise. The testimony of such a reception is the immediate stardom of Dorota Stalińska, who in her words off-screen gave the impression of being physically even stronger – as well as more selfish and less sentimental – than her characters, as well as the fact that

her physical appearance, marked by large jumpers, bootleg trousers, fast walking and husky voice, began a new fashion amongst young Polish women. Stalińska's strong women, along with Agnieszka from Wajda's films, played by Krystyna Janda, in the early 1980s came to epitomise modern Polish woman – if not completely liberated, at least trying to live her own way. Maria Kornatowska went so far as to suggest that both Janda and Stalińska represented the type of bisexual actresses (Kornatowska 1986: 178–79). I also find it symptomatic that twenty years after the premiere of *Without Love*, female journalists still appreciate the significance of Sass's early films in changing their views on what is proper conduct for a young woman and distancing themselves from the values encapsulated by the Polish Mother. For example, Liliana Śnieg-Czaplewska says that Sass's early films, which she regards as being ahead of their times, encouraged her to fight for herself, to become a feminist (see Śnieg-Czaplewska 1999).

Sass's later films, such as *Girls from Nowolipki*, *Tree of Paradise* and *Temptation* also, to use Teresa de Lauretis's phrase, address the spectator as a female (see de Lauretis 1987). However, in comparison with Sass's 'Trilogy', their significance in changing viewers' attitudes and behaviour is much less noticeable. In particular, they give no rise to any discussion about the situation of women in contemporary, or, indeed, even past Poland. In the reviews of these films an opinion prevails that they represent a universal, ahistorical situation of a woman. Similarly, although actresses in these films continued to be praised by the critics and rewarded at the film festivals (particularly Magdalena Cielecka, who played Anna in *Temptation*), there is no sign that they became role models or inaugurated new fashions amongst women. Finally, unlike the early films, which attracted audiences counted in hundreds of thousands or even millions, they achieved only moderate success at the box office.³ My own investigation concerning women's reaction to these films suggests that female viewers sympathise with Sass's characters and pity them, but fail to identify with them. The lack of wider and deeper resonance of Sass's later film amongst women can be explained by their conformity to a conservative notion of femininity. From a feminist perspective, these films are a step backwards in comparison with Sass's early films. The director herself seems to endorse such an assessment of her later work, by increasingly distancing herself from feminism and 'women's cinema', even claiming that choosing women as protagonists of her films is accidental, and that they stand in her films for 'human beings' (see Lenarciński 1994; Grzela 2000).

However, if we place *Girls from Nowolipki*, *Tree of Paradise* and, most importantly, *Temptation* in the context of Polish cinema of the period concurrent with their production (see Chapter 6), we will notice that they also challenge to a certain extent the prevailing way of representing women, as lacking any subjectivity and dignity. By contrast, Sass in her films demon-

strates that women possess subjectivity and analyses it with patience and sympathy.

Note

1. At the time when Sass made *Without Love* Italy became very fashionable in Poland. The songs of Italian pop star Drupi were extremely popular and Italian men were regarded as the sexiest in the world – hence, the dream of many Polish female teenagers and young women to go to Italy and marry an Italian. Sass both plays on these stereotypes and subverts them.
2. From this perspective *Scream* and *A Woman Alone* can be regarded as films anticipating some movies of the next decade, which allude to the disadvantages brought to women by the new political system, such as *Nic (Nothing, 1998)*, directed by Dorota Kędzierzawska (discussed in Chapter 11) and *Torowisko (Track-way, 1999)*, directed by Urszula Urbaniak.
3. The director herself largely blames cultural policy in Poland – namely the narrow distribution of her films – for their failure to reach a wider audience (see Pierzchała 1997: 14).