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“Let the Sirens Roar”: The Women’s Protests in Poland and the Artistic Response to the Backlash

Introduction

*Niech wyją syreny! (Let the Sirens Roar!)*¹ – reads an inscription placed under a silhouette that is well known to every Pole, represented, in paraphrased form, in a poster by Magda Wolna, a printmaker and illustrator based in Poznań (Figure 1). The Mermaid of Warsaw monument, which was erected on the bank of Vistula River in the spring of 1939 and refers to the coat of arms of the Polish capital, is the magnum opus of the eminent sculptor Ludwika Nitschowa (1889–1989). It is worth mentioning that this sculpture was modelled after Krystyna Kraheńska, a poet, ethnographer, and a participant of the Warsaw Uprising, killed on August 2, 1944, when she was only thirty years old.

¹ All translations from Polish are by the author, unless otherwise indicated. The graphic works discussed in the paper (unless otherwise indicated) were created in the autumn of 2020.

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Exactly like Nitschowa’s statue, the silhouette depicted in Wolna’s poster holds a round shield in her left arm – an unequivocal symbol of *defence* and *resistance*. Her right hand, however, holds not a sword (as does the original effigy) but a massive red lightning bolt that can be read as an archetypal cross-cultural symbol of *power* and *might*. In turn, the very outline of the *bolt* – here appropriated by Wolna – was designed a few years ago by another artist, Aleksandra Jasionowska, who will be discussed in more detail later in the paper. What is particularly striking is that the Mermaid drawn by Wolna is apparently pregnant.



Figure 1. Magda Wolna. *Niech wyją syreny!* (*Let the Sirens Roar!*). 2020.

The discussed poster – like dozens if not (to date) hundreds of other similar works – is an expressive artistic comment on the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal, dated 22 October 2020 (Ref. No. K 1/20),² that tightens the restrictions on reproductive rights in Poland. Namely, the Tribunal found *unconstitutional* the provision of the 1993 Act on *Family Planning, the Protection of Foetuses, and Grounds for Permitting the Termination of Pregnancy* (article 4a 2.), which

² See: The Constitutional Tribunal judgement of 22 October 2020: *Family Planning, the Protection of Foetuses, and Grounds for Permitting the Termination of Pregnancy*. Ref. No. K 1/20 (The Constitutional Tribunal of Poland, 2000).

previously allowed legal abortion “if a pre-natal examination or other medical premises indicate a high probability of severe and irreversible damage to the foetus or of an incurable life-threatening disease in the child”³

The ruling – officially published in the Journal of Law on January 27, 2021 and, significantly, adopted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic – sparked enormous social opposition, comparable only to the massive anti-communist demonstrations of the 1980s and the much more recent so-called “black umbrellas” protests (the name being, in a way, the result of the vagaries of autumn weather)⁴, which occurred after October 3, 2016 (see, e.g., Davies, 2016). And so, last year thousands of Polish women and men again took to the streets of cities and towns. (At their peak, as many as 430 thousand people participated in these protests).⁵ In certain aspects, the Strike of 2020 can be considered more spectacular than the one of 2016 and sometimes even literally dramatic. But, even more importantly, it was mainly a protest of *young* people, a great manifestation of feelings and a political orientation of that *generation* of Poles who were born around the turn of the millennium.⁶

The main subject of this article is the artistic works that accompanied these protests and provided a kind of visual commentary that rhymes with them. In my discussion, I refer to the most characteristic iconographic materials, mainly posters, uploaded and shared by young artists to their profiles on popular social media and specially created websites. The most important here are the activities of Pogotowie Graficzne (Graphic Emergency), “a visual, nationwide, bottom-up initiative” (Heller, 2020),⁷ founded in 2016 by Marta

³ Translation of the Act into English by Dorota Szelewa (Szelewa, 2015, p. 23).

⁴ Also referred to as “black protests” due to the black clothing worn by protesters.

⁵ According to data of the National Police Headquarters. See *Strajk Kobiet*, 2020.

⁶ The outcome of a survey conducted by Kantar in a representative group of 1,010 adult Poles between November 6 and 11, 2020 indicates that 18- to 24-year-old people represent as much as 29% of the protesters. See Kublik, 2020.

⁷ In his article, published in the internet magazine *The Design Observer*, Steven Heller explains: “Graphic Emergency is a visual, nationwide, bottom-up initiative (...)”. Pogotowie Graficzne supports nationwide anti-government demonstrations, including the Black protests by the National Women’s Strike (from 2016, 2018), the Free Courts protests (2017 and 2018), the proactive “There is no vacation from democracy!” protests against the Judicial Act, and others” (Heller, 2020).

Pogotowie Graficzne (Graphic Emergency) in social media: <https://pogotowie.tumblr.com/>; <https://www.facebook.com/graficznepogotowie/>; https://www.instagram.com/pogotowie_graficzne/ (Pogotowie Graficzne, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Pogotowie Graficzne [@pogotowie_graficzne], n.d.).

Also of great social importance is the APP (Archiwum Protestów Publicznych / The Archive of Public Protests), initiated by Rafał Milach, which is “a semi-open platform for distribut-

Ludwiszewska (aka Martiszu), a young graphic artist based in Warsaw who is known to Polish readers, for example, from her illustrations published in the cultural magazine *Przekrój*.

As demonstrated further below, the productions under the aegis of Pogotowie Graficzne refer to important moments in the recent history of Poland, and to common tradition and imagery. Moreover, to some extent, they also refer to the countercultural revolution of the late 1960s, and especially to the activities of L'Atelier Populaire, established by students of Académie des Beaux Arts in Paris and based on a similar concept of 'publish and share' (see, e.g., Wlassikoff et al., 2008/2018). The aesthetic and, therefore, to a large extent ethical tastes of the Paris May of 1968 and the All-Poland Women's Strike of 2020 share an intelligent humour with a note of irony, which, metaphorically speaking, is sometimes sharper than a pen.

I. Words like bolts

O Youth! Pass me thy wings...

(Mickiewicz, 1820/2007, p. 49)⁸

Because, replied the foreigner, squinting up at the sky,
where black birds darted silently in anticipation of the coolness of the evening,
because Annushka has already bought sunflower oil, and not only bought it
but spilled it too.

(Bulgakov, 1967/1994, p. 13)

In cold autumn evenings, the protesting youth were warming themselves by singing and dancing, usually jumping to the rhythm of *Call on Me* by Eric Prydz. The All-Poland Women's Strike also generated new, original protest songs (e.g., a hip-hop song by Karol Krupiak, a teenager from Silesia), as well as numerous covers and paraphrases of known songs, amongst which a Polish version of *Bella Ciao* – an anthem of Italian antifascist partisans – definitely stands out. (This song was recorded by the artistic duo Di Libe brent

ing images connected with social and political tensions in Poland from 2015 until now." See *Archiwum Protestów Publicznych* (n.d.).

⁸ This is the first stanza of Mickiewicz's *Ode to Youth*, translated by Jarek (Jarosław) Zawadzki: "No Heart, no Spirit – Lo! cadaverous crowds! / O Youth! Pass me thy wings / And let me o'er the dead earth soar..." (Mickiewicz, 1820/2007, p. 49)

wi a nase Szmate.) Frequently, loudspeakers also blasted out *The Imperial March*, a famous theme by John Williams that was composed for *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*.

Words and slogans commenting on the critical situation in a sophisticated and allusive way played an especially important role in this national mass walk. One of the best examples is the sentence "Podmiot nie zgadza się z orzeczeniem", which can be literally translated as "The subject doesn't agree with the predicate". (In this case no censor can apparently find a basis for intervention.)⁹ Yet, in Polish the noun 'orzeczenie' means not only 'a predicate' but also 'a ruling' or 'a judgement', thus giving the sentence its double meaning. Another already historic play on words, "Respect existence or expect resistance", which is associated with The Civil Rights Movement, was also frequently written on banners. Amongst slogans copied directly from English, a popular paraphrase of a title of Cindi Lauper's song, "GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUNDamental rights", also predominated.

A certain play on words, although not as striking when translated into English (which does not show grammatical gender to such an extent), was also present in slogans such as "Wszyscy jesteśmy kobietami" or "Wszyscy jesteśmy feministkami" ("We all are women", "We are all feminists"). Here, the word 'all' refers to the male or gender-unspecified mixed community. (In Polish, a female version of 'all' is 'wszystkie'.) Furthermore, in the slogans quoted above, the echoes of the Paris May 1968 protests can be noted, which proclaimed, in the context of Daniel Cohn-Bendit's case: "Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands" ("We are all German Jews"), and "Nous sommes tous indésirables" ("We are all undesirables"). It is worth noting that the title of the famous manifesto by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (2015), when translated into French was given a meaning that refers to a gender-related play on words: *Nous sommes tous des féministes* (see Adichie, 2020). (In French, the female plural form of 'all' is *toutes*.)

During the strike, relatively numerous references to mainstream international literature also appeared. One such slogan was "Annuszka już wylała olej" ("Annushka has already spilled the oil"), taken almost literally from Mikhail Bulgakov's brilliant novel *The Master and Margarita* (in Russian original:

⁹ One possible strategy for misleading censors is the use of double meanings, of which one is neutral. As in the above case: a simple sentence referring to grammar. On censorship in Polish art after 1989, see, e.g., Dąbrowski & Demenko, 2019.

Macmep u Mapzapuma, 1966–1967), being a metaphoric allusion to the inevitable, to the unavoidable fate. The literary preferences of the young generation were also manifested in the evening of October 31, 2020, directly preceding All Saints' Day and All Soul's Day, Catholic feasts that are celebrated in a very solemn way in Poland on November 1 and 2, respectively.

To a large extent, a prefiguration of these feasts was the pre-Christian Slavic Forefathers' Eve (*Dziady*), a rite that aimed to appease the souls of those who had already passed away. In the past, these rites served as a canvas for *The Forefathers' Eve*, a series of dramas by the great Polish Romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz, published in four parts between 1822 and 1860 (Mickiewicz, 1822–1860/2016). As a part of the Women's Strike, a group of young artists in their twenties and thirties selected this canonical work of Mickiewicz and staged a performance containing fragments of it in the windows of a house in Warsaw in the street bearing the poet's name.¹⁰ Regardless of our opinion about the final effect of that performance – which, after all, had been prepared rather spontaneously and impromptu – an important historic analogy comes into mind here: the iconic stage adaptation of *Dziady*, directed by Kazimierz Dejmek. The last official staging of this play (30 January 1968) caused a wave of student protests aimed mainly at censorship. The staging, soon after withdrawn from general release by the censors, became, to a large extent, a hotbed of protests regarding the memorable 1968 Polish political crisis, referred to as March 1968. Thus, today we have again witnessed the *return* of the rebellious *spirit* of Mickiewicz, who exactly two hundred years ago wrote: "O Youth! Pass me thy wings". The 2020 protests were marked with the influence of the Bard's work using Derridean terminology and the romantic 'hauntology' (*hantologie*) of the youth revolution.¹¹

Nevertheless, in this strike the language of sublime literary allusions has given way to words brutally simple and vulgar. Here, I am especially referring to the slogan: "Wyp...ć!", a verb in the imperative mood meaning roughly "F..k off!", which was frequently visible on large banners carried at the head of the demonstrations. The use of this specific word seems to result from a sense

¹⁰ The performance entitled *Dziady na Mickiewicza*, directed by Oskar Sadowski, adapted by Anka Herbut, music BAASCH (31.10.2020). Actors and musicians taking part included Aleksandra Domańska, Gosia Gorol, Katarzyna Warnke, Aga Zaryan, Marysia Sadowska, Michał Szpak, Natalia Przybyś and Krzysztof Zalewski. See "Dziady na Mickiewicza", 2020.

¹¹ A special issue of *European Romantic Review* was dedicated to *Women and Protest*. See esp. Kraft, 2021.

of helplessness and anger. As Agnieszka Graff, a researcher and writer, states in her book, published in 2015 together with the visual artist Marta Frej (discussed further below): “In Poland, there grew a generation of girls who were not going to be nice any more” (Graff & Frej, 2015, p. 107). And, as Adichie argues in her essay, being impolite can be constructive: “I am angry. We should all be angry”. For, as she writes: “Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change” (Adichie, 2015, p. 21).

A jokingly ironic comment directed to those who felt offended by the use of the word ‘w...ć’ was offered by Magda Danaj (Figure 2.), a graphic artist and illustrator based in Gdańsk, who for several years has been publishing her *Porysunki* online, first on her blog and now mainly on Facebook. (This title is, again, based on a play on words and can be roughly translated as ‘posts-drawings’ or ‘laid-back’ drawings). In the works of Danaj, a graduate of Polish philology at the University of Gdańsk, words and short texts play an important role, accurately and with a dose of clever humour commenting (and self-commenting) on the daily life of women. In fact, her works are usually apolitical and not socially engaged, but with some excellent exceptions: for example, Danaj’s illustrations to the Polish edition of the work of Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, *Until We Are Free* (2016) (see Ebadi, 2016/2017). Another exception is the poster shown in Figure 2., which presents a canvas/loom on which a female hand has embroidered the word ‘wyp...ć’ in red thread. “Is this subtle and feminine enough for you?”, asks a caption written above in characteristic ‘soft’ letters.

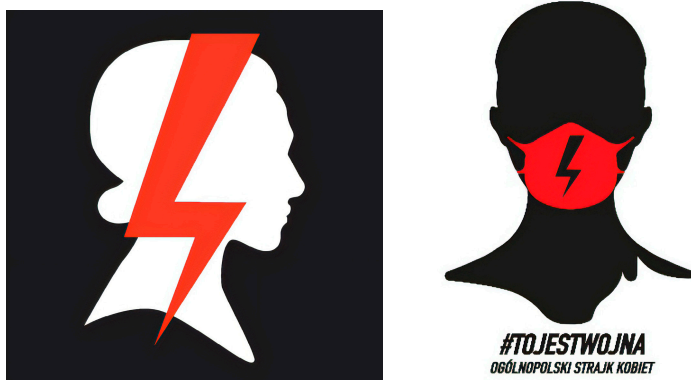


Figure 2. Magda Danaj, Untitled, 2020.

II. Visual Aspects

The Logo(s)

In this way, we come to the visual side of the strike, as its omnipresent symbol of a red thunderbolt has an equally strong or even aggressive effect as the profanity quoted above. This already iconic symbol is part of a logo (Figure 3.) designed by artist and activist Aleksandra (Ola) Jasionowska for the protests in 2016, and redesigned in 2020 to match the time of pandemic (Figure 4.). The thunderbolt that was again recently carried on banners, included in countless posters and stickers, displayed in windows, painted on faces and printed on facemasks, resulted in controversies of a political nature. Although for some representatives of the government the thunderbolt is (groundlessly) associated with the runic insignia of the SS (NSDAP's Schutzstaffel), it should be noted that it is actually also well established in Polish military heraldry: for example, in the logo of the special forces of the Grey Ranks (Szare Szeregi – a code name for The Polish Scouting and Guiding Association (ZHP) during the Second World War), who bravely fought against the Nazi German occupation.



Figures 3. and 4. Aleksandra Jasionowska. Logo designs for the All-Poland Women's Strike 2016 (left) and 2020 (right).

It is worth noting here that sometimes the strike participants also adapt another conspiracy symbol of the Resistance that was used by the Home Army

during the war, i.e., Polska Walcząca (Fighting Poland), most likely designed by Anna Smoleńska, at that time a history of art student at the underground University of Warsaw, who died in Auschwitz in 1943. That emblem, also called ‘The Anchor’, was painted as graffiti on the walls of occupied Warsaw, and it consists of two stylised letters: P (for ‘Polska’/ *Poland*) and W (for ‘Walcząca’/ *Fighting*). The slogan itself, slightly modified, which appears on banners and in internet posts as ‘Pol(s)ka Walcząca’, with the letter ‘s’ removed, can be understood as ‘Polish Woman Fighting’.

However, let us return to the symbol designed by Jasionowska. One could very well attempt a mythological exegesis here by indicating that the thunderbolt has an archetypal meaning that is used in various cultures as a symbol of might and supernatural power, or by referring to examples from popular culture, like the characteristic make up of Ziggy Stardust. (This reference, close to hearts of all David Bowie fans, was, for example, used in a poster by Jakub Kwiatkowski.) Nevertheless, Jasionowska herself dismisses any complex interpretations. As she explained in an interview for *Newsweek*, this emblem has a very simple message: “Be careful, we warn you. We don’t agree with women being deprived of their basic human rights” (after: Batycka, 2020).¹² “Freedom is our key message” she adds in an interview for *Artnet News* (after: Brown, 2020).

Freedom is a Woman, as Julie Felix, a recently deceased folk star, sang (see the single released together with Linda Moylan on March 8, 2020). And this is also the title of a poster designed by another young artist, Joanna Musiał (Figure 5.), quoting the allegorical figure of Freedom (and, at the same time, a personification of Marianne) from the famous painting by Eugène Delacroix, *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830), which commemorates the events of the July Revolution. Photos of two semi-naked women that were widely published after the so-called Blockade of Warsaw of October 26, 2020 also bring that great Romantic painting to mind. The two Polish ‘Marianne’s’ who then, with flares in their hands, jumped on roofs of cars, were Karolina Micuła, a singer and performance artist, and Monika Dąbrowska, an activist, with her mastectomy scars covered by tattoos. When Micuła was asked by reporters about this iconic coincidence in an article whose suggestive title can be translated as “Women Leading the People”, published in *Polityka*, she replied: “This analogy is accurate, insofar as a woman’s body is not always

¹² Translation by Dorian Batycka (Batycka, 2020).

a sexual object, and it is our decision what we do with it” (after: Szczerbiak et al., 2020, p. 89).



Figure 5. Joanna Musiał. *Wolność jest kobietą* [Freedom is a Woman], 2020.

Furthermore, leaving the Polish context for a moment, a moving video of the Spanish artist Cristina Lucas, created in 2009 and entitled *La Liberté Raisonnée*, can also be included in this constellation of associations. What is exceptionally striking is that, in this perfectly executed video tableau, the vivante Marianne from Delacroix’s painting was cruelly *betrayed* by her companions.

“Liberté – Egalité – Sororité” and “the Backlash”

The gloves are off now. Which at least makes the backlash easier to see, if no less painful.

(Faludi et al., 2020, p. 338)

In circles of feminist researchers and activists, the “conviction that Polish democracy betrayed women after 1989” is quite common (Graff & Frej, 2015, p. 239). This *betrayal* was manifested by the removal from public history of the memory of heroines of the era of Solidarity who fought against the Communist regime side by side with men, with similar heavy sacrifices.¹³ However,

¹³ The politics of erasure has also been analysed in Graff’s 2010 book, *Magma*, which provides a commentary on the status of Polish women after twenty years of transformation. To paraphrase her words: “The collective memory is exclusionary and it usually excludes women.”

now this specific politics of erasure is not the crucial problem. As Graff, already quoted above, noted herself, Polish feminism "with roots in THAT heroic history" has, through the decades, become "POST-transformation feminism and has evolved towards diverse positions and diverse identitarian narratives" (Graff & Frej, 2015, p. 243, emphasis in original).

This concerns not only the historical (and in some sense, local) *betrayal* (it should be noted here that this term is, in some sense, associated with the victimisation of women) but also a (cross-cultural) *backlash*, understood exactly in accordance with the meaning given to this word by Susan Faludi in her classic 1991 study, entitled *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*.¹⁴ As Faludi wrote, referring to the anti-feminist propaganda of the 1980s:

The truth is that the last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious: in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall.

The backlash is at once sophisticated and banal, deceptively 'progressive' and proudly backward. It deploys both the 'new' findings of 'scientific research' and the dime-store moralism of yesteryear; it turns into the media sound bites of both the glib pronouncements of pop-psych trend-watchers and the frenzied rhetoric of New Right preachers. (Faludi, 1991/2006, pp. 9–10)¹⁵

That anti-feminist *backlash* gained particular force during 'Trumpism' (see Faludi et al., 2020). The "undeclared war against American women" became

("Zbiorowa pamięć jest wybiórcza i zwykle wybiera mężczyzn") (Graff, 2010, pp. 15–16). Moreover, the status of (Polish) women as "subaltern counterpublics" (Majewska, 2018, p. 248), marginalized and functioning in the "epistemic field of invisibility" ("epistemiczne pole niewidzialności"; Majewska, 2018, p. 72) has been extensively discussed by Ewa Majewska in her 2018 book. On "counterpublics of the common", see also: Majewska, 2021. On the history of Polish women in the context of transformation, see also, e.g., Kościelniak, 2020.

¹⁴ The word "backlash" in the context of Polish women's protests was used, for example, in Henley & Streck, 2020.

¹⁵ As Faludi said in an interview for *Signs* journal: "The backlash of the eighties was far more subtle and undercover in some respects. Its central tool was the propagation of the myth that it was feminism [underl. S. F.] itself that was making women unhappy – that women's newfound feminist independence and liberation was cheating them of love, marriage, children, mental health. Looking back at the introduction of Backlash, I see that I wrote that 'The force and furore of the backlash churn beneath the surface, largely invisible to the public eye' (Faludi, 1991, p. 12). Not anymore. The gloves are off now. Which at least makes the backlash easier to see, if no less painful" (Faludi et al., 2020, p. 338).

open and, referring to the statement of the researcher quoted in the motto, waged without gloves. In my opinion, however, this term has a much more universal or even global meaning that can be equally well applied to the Polish context. This is actually reflected in one of the slogans carried on banners by young Poles today: "To jest wojna" ("This is war").

The October 2020 Tribunal decision (and the January 2021 publication of the ruling) is part of the more extensive phenomenon of "the conservative reaction against progressive social change" (Dragiewicz, 2018, p. 336), which has been gradually intensifying since the Polish elections of 2015. A "post-feminist discourse" (Flood et al., 2021, p. 402) founded on the conviction that feminism is now 'obsolete' because it has achieved its objectives, is today being replaced by openly anti-feminist rhetoric. The key slogan, a bogey word that for years has been used in Poland by conservative politicians, publicists, and some representatives of the Church – as Faludi would call them, "antifeminist counterrevolutionaries" (Faludi, 1991/2006, p. xii) – is so-called 'genderism' or 'gender' ideology. I intentionally write the word 'gender' in quotation marks here because, in the political discourse, it functions as a kind of neosemanticism whose tone is inconsistent with its scientific and therefore neutral meaning. However, a discussion of the process during which this neutral term transformed into a demonic bogey word – a kind of a prop in the cultural war – would significantly exceed the scope of this article.¹⁶

The attitudes and rhetoric of politicians trying to maintain the "patriarchal status quo" (Faludi, 1991, p. xvi and further) are characterised at all costs by a nostalgia for "an idealised past in which the structural inequality was normalised" (Dragiewicz, 2018, p. 336). It is also a nostalgia for the *heroic past*, for the clank of weapons, national uprisings and insurrections, as if Polish women had not participated in them at all. Thus, today's Polish right-wing movement appropriates the national memory, usurping (groundlessly) the title of the sole successors of those who can be called heroes and heroines. Yet today this specific *appropriation of national memory* finds its counterpoint in the activities of young artists on the other side of the political 'barricade', who equally strongly identify themselves, for example, with the ethos of Solidarity.

¹⁶ This is precisely discussed by the already quoted Graff. See Graff, 2014. Moreover, the extended analysis on "both ultraconservative anti-gender campaigns and the mass feminist mobilization responding to them" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021, p. 4) is the theme of a recent book by A. Graff and E. Korolczuk. See Graff & Korolczuk, 2021.

The (New) Solidarity

In this context, the best example is a series of posters by Jarek (Jarosław) Kubicki, a Warsaw-based graphic designer, photographer and painter, and a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk (Figure 6). In them, this artist presents a kind of a double visual paraphrase: first, of the famous iconic poster by Tomasz Sarnecki (1966–2018), the original of which is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Figure 7; see Sarnecki, 1989); second, of the logo of the Solidarity Independent Trade Union, designed by Jerzy Janiszewski (b. 1952), a graphic designer and distinguished anti-Communist dissident who participated in the Gdańsk Shipyard strike in the memorable August of 1980. In the background of his posters, Kubicki places the angry slogan “Wyp...ć”, quoted above, writing it in so-called Solidaryca, i.e., the characteristic, expressive typeface designed by Janiszewski.



Figure 6. (left) Jarek Kubicki, 2020.

Figure 7. (right) Tomasz Sarnecki, *High Noon. 4 June 1989* [*W samo południe. 4 czerwca 1989*], 1989, (“Solidarity” logo designed by Jerzy Janiszewski in the background). Victoria and Albert Museum. London.

As Janiszewski recalls, the letters forming the word ‘Solidarność’ – the original logotype of 1980 – hand-written with a brush and red paint, symbolise “people sticking together”, united by a common cause.¹⁷ The words of the art-

¹⁷ As Janiszewski recounts: “In the evening, in my flat in Morena [a district of Gdańsk], I started trying to see how the word [‘Solidarność’] could be best expressed graphically and

ist, spoken in 2019 in an interview for *Teraz Polska (Poland Now)* magazine, proved to be somehow prophetic: "I wish for my symbol to unite people once again". Although the hopes expressed in this sentence were actually specifically associated with the presidential elections of 2020 – as Janiszewski designed a logo in *Solidaryca* for the opposition candidate, Rafał Trzaskowski – since then his postulate of a new mass demonstration in support of a common cause has been fulfilled, as we can clearly see, in a completely new way.¹⁸

In turn, Sarnecki's original poster was created spontaneously for the first democratic elections of June 4, 1989 (when the artist was 23 years old), which ended the authoritarian rule under the USSR. Sarnecki, quoting in the background the already mentioned logo by Janiszewski, showed in his poster Will Kane (or rather, Gary Cooper playing that role (*High Noon*, directed by Fred Zinnemann, 1952)) holding a voting card in his hand. Referring to that iconic work, Kubicki, in turn, quoted female characters known from popular culture, namely film heroines representing freedom, rebellion, and sometimes also revenge: Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1979), Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984), Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie) in *Tomb Raider* (dir. Simon West, 2001) and The Bride/Black Mamba (Uma Thurman) in *Kill Bill* (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2003). In an interview for *Polityka*, this artist explains both the issue of the vulgar slogan – to which he referred because, according to him, "nice ones were used in the past" and which today, similarly to the slogan "Solidarność", had the power to unite people – as well as the film inspirations. "I decided to refer to such icons of popular culture", he explains, "which we all know, so there were no doubts about the context and the image of women presented. Hence, the choice of the most widely known *badasses* – strong and powerful characters" (after: Knera, 2020).

with which typeface. (...) And suddenly it hit me that the word should be handwritten with paint and a brush, like the slogans on the walls. I started to link the letters like people linked together like the links of a chain – in solidarity" (after: Tataj & Broszko, 2019).

Solidaryca, its visual impact and manifold (political) applications have been discussed in an extensive study by A. Szydłowska (see Szydłowska, 2018).

¹⁸ In the interview quoted above, Janiszewski also said that he did not approve the use of his logo by today's Solidarity trade union, as now "it has nothing in common with real solidarity". And, further on: "The symbol is being devaluated, deformed, illegally used for commercial purposes in Poland and abroad" (Tataj & Broszko, 2019).

The list of iconic characters used by Kubicki is crowned with the noble and courageous Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher), as seen in the first part of the *Star Wars* saga by George Lucas (1977). I want to highlight this example to emphasize that Kubicki’s work (Figure 8.) is comparable with the posters of American female artists who used the iconic image of Carrie Fisher that were prepared for The Women’s March of January 21st, 2017, organised on the day following the day of Donald Trump’s presidency inauguration. These posters included the work of Hayley Gilmore, stating “Women’s place is in the resistance”, and Vanessa Witter, saying “We are the resistance” in the style of Barbara Kruger (see Corkins, 2017). Also, the sentence placed on each of the posters of the said series compliments these messages, “To jest wojna” (“This is a war”), with the letter “j” stylised as a thunderbolt.

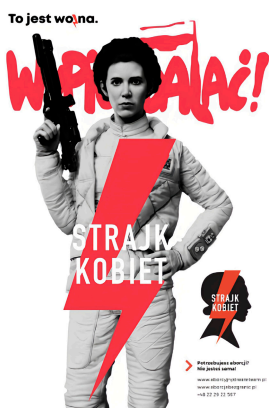


Figure 8. (left) Jarek Kubicki, 2020.



Figure 9. (right) Patrycja Podkościelny, *Poland, wtf?*, 2020.

Silent Tales – Gestures and Costumes

There is one more iconic figure from popular culture to which protesting women in Argentina, Ireland, USA, and recently also in Poland, have been referring for several years. It is a character from the American dystopian series *The Handmaid’s Tale* (dir. Bruce Miller, 2017–; Miller et al., 2017–present), wrapped in a characteristic red cloak and white bonnet. This series, with Elisabeth Moss playing the character named June Osborne/Offred/Ofjoseph, is an adaptation of the book by the great Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, published under the same title in 1985 (see Atwood, 1985). Therefore, also during demonstrations organised by the All-Poland

Women’s Strike, some women were dressed as handmaids from the imaginary totalitarian state of Gilead, in which all rights and privileges, as well as all women, were the sole property of men. An article in *The Guardian* by Peter Beaumont and Amanda Holpuch, with the tell-tale title *How “The Handmaid’s Tale” Dressed Protests across the World*, quoted this comment from Atwood: “The handmaid’s costume has been adopted by women in many countries as a symbol of protest about various issues having to do with the requisitioning of women’s bodies by the state” (after: Beaumont & Holpuch, 2018). A weeping woman wearing a white bonnet that, as can be easily imagined, somehow *shut out* the surrounding word and at the same time *obscured* and separated her from reality, was also shown in a poster by Patrycja Podkościelny, an illustrator, graphic designer and typography teacher (Figure 9). Against a background of her red cloak or mantle, the artist wrote ‘Poland’ and, in smaller letters, an acronym of a question expressing deep outrage, “WTF?”.

The objectification, or more precisely, brutal *commodification* of women in the political discourse is also the subject of a poster by Joanna Gębal (b. 1989), an illustrator and designer based in Warsaw, and a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. The poster by Gębal (Figure 10) shows a brunette with short hair, tightened lips, and the thunderbolt emblem on her face; she is wearing an earring with a bar code, exactly the same as is attached to the ears of cows. The image is topped with a caption written with a sweeping black line: “Dość!” (“Enough!”).



Figure 10. (left) Joanna Gębal, *DOŚĆ!* [Enough!], 2020.

Figure 11. (right) Agata Nowicka (aka Endo), *Untitled*, 2020.

The word "dość!" is also used in a poster by Helena Hauswirt, showing a small, clenched female fist with exquisitely painted nails; it can be said that this represents an image of vast force behind the gentleness. The clenched fist also appears in a poster by Agata Nowicka, also known as Endo (b. 1976), a graphic artist named the best Polish illustrator by *Press* magazine in 2011, but this time it is drawn with more expressive lines and emerges from a velvety black background (Figure 11). (Apart from Polish cultural and literary magazines, such as *Przekrój* and *Lampa*, Endo also cooperated, for example, with *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*.) However, in Poland she is most widely recognised for her blog, written in the form of an e-comic since 2001, and being to a large extent a visual chronicle of her personal life, but, indirectly, also of the transformations happening in Poland throughout those years.

It is also worth mentioning, at least briefly, works based on interesting typographical elements and paraphrases of symbols recognised all over the world, such as the Nuclear Disarmament logo, designed by British designer and pacifist Gerald Holtom (1914–1985), which was rearranged by Ola Kusmider to resemble the silhouette of a woman's body. Amongst numerous works based on a typographic play, a work by Matylda Bruniecka, currently a PhD student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, is worth noting. It is based on the title "Won od łon" ("Hands off wombs!"), which rhymes in Polish.

Finally, any description of the visual side of the strike would be incomplete without referring to the works of already mentioned Marta Frej, a painter and graphic designer born in Częstochowa in 1973 who graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź and is also an activist and a member of the liberal-leftist Krytyka Polityczna (Political Critique) Club. This distinguished illustrator, whose works include excellent designs for a book by Anna Kowalczyk (see Kowalczyk, 2018), is known to the public mainly from memes published on the internet, which for years have consequently commented on various aspects of life in Poland, especially the life of women.¹⁹ On her Facebook account, the artist identifies herself as a 'fictional character', which has special meaning because Polish-speaking Facebook users can choose from only a few female forms here (see Graff & Frej, 2015, p. 9). Thus, paradoxically, today this 'fictional character' is one of the most widely recognised 'brands' in the Polish artistic milieu, enjoying the interest of connoisseurs and 'common people' alike.

¹⁹ See: Marta Frej's Facebook account: <https://pl-pl.facebook.com/martafrejmemy/> (Marta Frej Memy, n.d.).

However, even a brief analysis of Frej’s works, which are so consistent with the spirit of our times, would significantly exceed the scope of this paper. The work of this artist consists of numerous more private memes that refer to her personal and family life, frequently in the form of self-portraits. However, the artist increasingly often uses a more publicist tone that is openly politically engaged. Her output includes, for example, a graphically processed photograph of Polish bishops with a caption added: “O kobietach wiemy wszystko” (“We know everything about women”). Another one is a processed frame from a popular TV programme, in which the majority of experts are men. One of them says: “Gentlemen, first, as usual, we are going to randomly select an expert speaking on behalf of women...”. Frej’s works also include a paraphrase of an archival photograph depicting four female soldiers pushing a heavy gun, with a bitter caption: “Nie musimy nawet celować, gdziekolwiek walnie, wszędzie patriarchy” (“We do not have to aim it, wherever it hits, it’s patriarchy”) (Figure 12). These are only a few examples from many similar works created in recent years.



Figure 12. Marta Frej. A meme published in: Graff and Frej (2015).

“I am a tube giving voice to women’s stories”, said Frej in the interview given to *Polska Times* on March 8, 2020 (see Komaiszko, 2020). That “tube” spoke particularly loudly during the ‘black protest’ in 2016, which this artist decided to commemorate with a mural in which a heavy rain, not of raindrops but of silcrows, falls onto a ‘sea’ of black umbrellas (Warsaw, Targowa Street 15). After the October 2020 Tribunal decision, she responded equally strongly, publishing on the internet a meme with the scared face of a woman

with her mouth covered by a strong, apparently male hand. What is characteristic is that the hand is painted in white and red, the colours of the Polish flag (Figure 13). This work corresponds well to the motif of *obscuring* and *shutting out*, which I have already mentioned when writing about inspirations from the screen adaptation of Atwood’s novel. However, this type of image that presents femininity in the context of victimisation is rather exceptional amongst the numerous works created for the Women’s Strike in 2020. More often, we see here symbols of power, warning signs, thunderbolts, and clenched fists, responding to the actions of the government.



Figure 13. Marta Frej, Untitled, 2020.

Finally, I would like to note one more work accompanying the All-Poland Women’s Strike that is significant in the context of drawing from Polish tradition. It is a poster by Ola Szmida (b. 1987), a talented illustrator, motion designer and director of animated films who has an exceptional sense of humour. In her poster, according to the inscription, Szmida presents a “Fighting Polish woman”, a young girl sitting on a dun-coloured steed, dressed in stylised folk costume, with her red plaits blown by the wind and holding a thunderbolt in her left hand, angrily aimed at the dark surrounding space (Figure 14). This poster can evoke an association with works by Zofia Stryjeńska (1891–1976), an iconic character and distinguished painter who used folklore motifs with virtuosity, and whose fame extended far beyond the Polish context at one time. (In 1925 she won as many as 4 Grand Prix at the famous International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, which initiated the art déco style). In this context, a work by Stryjeńska from 1934 may aptly be seen as *striking*; it presents the character of *Perkun* and belongs to the series

Bożki słowiańskie (Slavic deities) in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw. The body of Perkun, a god of storms and fertility from the pantheon of the Balts, forms a thunderbolt of light (Figure 15).



Figure 14. Ola Szmida, *Polka walcząca* [A Fighting Polish Woman], 2020.



Figure 15. Zofia Stryjeńska, *Perkun* (from a *Slavic deities* series), crayon, 1934. The National Museum in Warsaw.



Figure 16. Kasia Piątek. A linocut poster prepared for the protest, to be printed out and shared (with the inscription: *Siostrzeństwo/Sisterhood*), 2020. (source: <https://kasiapiatek.pl/womens-strike-sisterhood-poster>)

Conclusion

The idea of *solidarity* (*solidarność*) and *sisterhood* (*siostrzeństwo*) represents the common denominator for the all works described above; the second of these slogans was reproduced literally in a poster by Kasia (Katarzyna) called Piątek, whose (typo)graphic form directly refers to the aesthetics of Atelier Populaire (Figure 16). In a spirit of solidarity, young artists publish and share their works on the internet, thus permitting their free quoting, reproduction and use for the needs of the Strike as posters, banners or stickers. Of course, the quality of these works is not uniform. For this article, I selected only those that are abundant with interesting symbolism and have a more allusive and ironic, not too literal, character.

Taking into account the subjective scope of this paper, I omitted specific responses in the form of relatively scarce works criticising the current protests; for example, some crude works by the anonymous collective The Krasnals.

By focusing on the visual side of the Strike, I also had to marginalise its audio part (by only briefly referring to created impromptu songs and musical paraphrases). In fact, recently created audio works, for example, by Diana Lelonek and Edka Jarzab (*Polifonia/Polyphony*), require a separate, more extensive study.

A separate text could also be dedicated to exhibitions spontaneously organised by students of Polish Academies, e.g., the one opened on December 18, 2020 by students of the first year of Painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, perversely entitled *To nie jest wystawa* (*This is not an exhibition*) and called a simple "walk" amongst the works. Such a title in the style of Magritte not only corresponded to a truly surreal moment in Polish politics but also protected against any attempts of censors, who could possibly accuse the students of breaching the anti-Covid sanitary regimen. The activities of Galeria Labirynt in Lublin also require particular attention as – when managed by Waldemar Tatarczuk in 2010–2021 – it became one of the most renowned galleries in Poland. On December 13 2020, the anniversary of the martial law imposed by the communist government in 1981, Galeria Labirynt opened an exhibition-manifesto with a meaningful title referring to one of the slogans borne today on the banners: *You will never walk alone*. The exhibition invited participation from not only professional artists but also from any citizens wishing to share their visual comments on the controversial Tribunal ruling. (The gallery also plans further activities, guided by an idea similar to Joseph Beuys' famous *Polentransport 1981*, a private archive donated by this artist to the Museum of Art in Łódź as his gesture of solidarity with Poles; see Beuys, 1981)

As I have shown above, the created recently posters, which are mainly by artists from the young generation and are archived in the repository of the Graphic Emergency website frequently refer to Polish history and traditions, to important events in history, and to iconic characters known to every Pole, both real and legendary, like the Mermaid of Warsaw, commemorated, for example, by Magda Wolna (mentioned in the introduction), or by Dominik Przerwa (Figure 17). With the All-Poland Women's Strike, the spirit of romantic rebellion (immortalised in Mickiewicz's stanzas) and, especially, the ethos of Solidarity of 1981 are brought to life, and this is most visible in the work of Jarek Kubicki that is described above, which refers both to the election poster created by Tomasz Sarnecki and to the Solidaryca typeface designed by Jerzy Janiszewski.



Figure 17. Dominik Przerwa, 2020.

The works discussed in this paper indicate that the cultural competences of Polish youth – their, as Pierre Bourdieu would say, “cultural capital” – are higher than one could assume. Importantly, these visual nods to the historical and literary tradition contradict the propaganda of the current authorities, usurping the right to call themselves the “heirs” or “successors” of the best Polish traditions, including the ethos of Solidarity. At the same time, the authorities are increasingly strongly turning against intellectual elites. Young, usually well-educated artists, graduates of Academies and Faculties of Arts, *reclaim* the historic memory for their generation by turning to national iconography and literary tradition. Responding to the cultural “backlash”, they do not want to be “nice” anymore. Time will show the direction which their artistic careers will take. Time will also tell how much of today’s ‘romantic’ young revolt will survive.

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„Niech wyją syreny”. Kobięce protesty w Polsce i artystyczna odpowiedź na „backlash”

Orzeczenie Trybunału Konstytucyjnego z 22 października 2020 roku, ograniczające prawa reprodukcyjne w Polsce – przyjęte w środku pandemii COVID-19 – wywołało silny sprzeciw społeczny i masowe demonstracje. Tematyka artykułu zogniskowana jest wokół prac artystycznych towarzyszących owym protestom, stanowiących ich wizualny komentarz, innymi słowy: ich wizualną „oprawę”. W niniejszych rozważaniach odniesiono się do najbardziej charakterystycznych materiałów ikonograficznych, głównie plakatów, zamieszczanych i udostępnianych przez (przeważnie młodych) artystów na profilach w popularnych mediach społecznościowych oraz na specjalnie wykreowanych witrynach (jak np. Pogotowie Graficzne). Zawartość treściowa tej twórczej „produkcji” często odnosi się do ważnych momentów w najnowszej historii Polski (Solidarność), tradycyjnej symboliki i sfery wyobraźniowości, a w pewnym względzie także i do kontrkulturowej rewolty późnych lat 60., zwłaszcza do L’Atelier Populaire założonego przez studentów paryskiej Académie des Beaux Arts. W artykule wskazano, iż omawiane plakaty można interpretować jako pokoleniową odpowiedź na „backlash” w takim rozumieniu, jakie nadała temu słowu Susan Faludi w swej klasycznej już rozprawie z 1991 roku.

Słowa kluczowe: protest społeczny, sztuka i polityka, artystyczny aktywizm artystyczny, grafika, prawa kobiet w Polsce, „backlash”

“Let the sirens roar”: The women’s protests in Poland and the artistic response to the backlash

The ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal of 22 October 2020, which tightened the restrictions on reproductive rights in Poland and was adopted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, sparked strong social opposition and massive demonstrations. The article focuses on artistic works accompanying these protests, providing a kind of visual commentary to them or, in other words, their visual “framework”. The discussion refers to the most characteristic iconographic materials, mainly posters, uploaded and shared by (mostly young) artists on their profiles on popular social media and specially created websites (such as Graphic Emergency). The content of this artistic “production” often refers to important moments in the recent history of Poland (the Solidarity movement), traditional symbols, and the imaginal sphere; however, to some extent, it also refers to the countercultural revolution of the late 1960s, especially to L’Atelier Populaire, established by students of Académie des Beaux Arts in Paris. The article proposes that the discussed posters be interpreted as a generational counterreply

to the "backlash", understood in accordance with the meaning given to that word by Susan Faludi in her classic 1991 study.

Keywords: social protest, art and politics, artistic activism, graphic arts, women's rights in Poland, backlash

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