‘Solidarity (Solidarność) on the Big and Small Screens: British Productions, 1980–1990’
Abstract

This dissertation examines British representations of Solidarity movement (Solidarność) in cinema and television between 1980 and 1990. It analyses fictional and non-fictional productions relating to the emergence and activities of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union ‘Solidarity’ (NSZZ ‘Solidarność’), the imposition of martial law, and the political, social and economic changes in Poland in the late 1980s. The central research question concerns the ways in which British screen culture represented the Polish experience of political upheaval and rendered it through its own genres, media formats, production practices and cultural codes. The research hypothesis is that British productions translated the Polish experience into forms and concepts legible to British audiences. This made it possible to present Solidarity from multiple perspectives, but also entailed a selection of themes, shifts of emphasis and simplifications. Restrictions on official audiovisual circulation in the Polish People’s Republic (PRL) also meant that some British productions acted as external intermediaries for Western audiences, addressing issues that Polish media could not discuss freely.

The corpus comprises nearly sixty films, television series, documentaries and programmes. The core material is supplemented by Polish and American productions used as points of reference. Television news bulletins and purely debate-based current-affairs programming fall outside the scope of the dissertation. The study combines aesthetic and contextual analysis with the perspective of New Cinema History, *production studies*, *distribution studies* and reception analysis. It considers the content and form of the works, the circumstances of their production, institutional production conditions, distribution and reception, as well as the actions of the PRL authorities in relation to selected productions. The source base consists of the audiovisual works themselves, archival and press materials, institutional documentation, memoir literature and interviews with the makers of the productions.

The first part of the dissertation examines fictional representations. Chapter One, *History and the Myth of Solidarity*, analyses ways of representing the most important events and figures associated with the movement. It takes as its starting point British traditions of docudrama and dramatised reconstruction. It discusses portrayals of the birth of Solidarity, its period of legal activity, the repression of martial law, the murder of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko,

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and the use of the Polish crisis within the conventions of the spy thriller. The analysis reveals a range of strategies: from the pursuit of factual accuracy, through self-reflexive questioning of the possibility of reconstructing history, to the universalisation of actual events. In these productions Solidarity functioned as a community of resistance, a victim of repression, a focus of martyrological memory, and a recognisable component of Cold War imagery.

Chapter Two, *History in the Private Sphere*, shifts the focus from the reconstruction of collective events to individual experience. In *Moonlighting*, *Success Is the Best Revenge* and *The Ploughman's Lunch*, the Polish crisis is reworked into stories of emigration, displacement, the manipulation of information, moral responsibility, and the right of the artist and journalist to represent the experience of others. History is not reconstructed chronologically here; instead, it shapes the protagonists' knowledge, choices and relationships. The Polish experience also serves as a means of critically examining British media, social conflict and responses to events taking place outside the West.

Chapter Three examines *Solidarity in Comedy and Satire*. The productions analysed show that Polish issues entered British popular culture as a subject recognisable without extensive explanation. Satirical programmes used Solidarity and martial law both to comment on events in Poland and to criticise Western media spectacle, political hypocrisy and British-American relations. Particular significance is attached to references to the British miners' strike and to the construction of Polishness as a figure of social resistance. Chapter Four synthesises the findings of the fictional section, showing that Polish events were transferred into British narrative frameworks and used both to explain Solidarity and to diagnose problems within Western society.

The second part of the dissertation examines documentary representations. Chapter Five, *From the First to the Second Solidarity*, opens with an account of British television documentary traditions and their public and educational function. It then traces the development of non-fiction representations of Solidarity from reports produced immediately after August 1980, through *current affairs* programmes, to the documentation of the union's underground activity and political repression during the 1980s. Subsequent sections broaden the perspective to include emigration, religion and the role of the Church, culture, everyday life, and the social experience of the final years of the PRL. By the end of the decade, Poland was being presented not only as the site of a conflict between communism and Solidarity, but also as one of the areas in which a new European order was beginning to take shape.

Chapter Six, *Documenting the Turning Point – 1989–1990*, deals with the period in which Solidarity was ceasing to be primarily a movement of resistance and becoming a

participant in political compromise and an actor sharing responsibility for the transformation. The material is organised according to the observer's position: at a distance, close up, and in between the participants in the changes. British productions recorded the social costs of market reforms, changes in social mores, the recovery of historical memory, the reorganisation of the media, and the erosion of the earlier unity of the Solidarity milieu. Chapter Seven summarises the documentary section, showing that British television followed Solidarity for almost the entire decade: from the movement's birth to the entry of its representatives into the realities of transformation.

Taken together, the two parts confirm the central research hypothesis. British representations of Solidarity were not neutral reflections of Polish reality, but forms of cultural and media translation. A common organising principle was the effort to understand and explain the phenomenon, pursued through different genres, editorial practices and authorial perspectives. Intermediaries between the two cultures played a particularly important role – reporters, Polish collaborators, émigrés, witnesses and protagonists. The process of translation nevertheless had its limits: it sometimes led to exoticisation, simplification, the reduction of religious experience to a social function, or the subordination of Polish events to Western interpretative frameworks. At the same time, an external perspective made it possible to address issues unavailable or marginalised in the official PRL media sphere and, by the end of the decade, to ask questions about the social costs of reform and the durability of the Solidarity ethos.

The study of the circulation of these productions also reveals a paradox in the relationship between politics and institutional practice. The PRL authorities criticised some Western representations and attempted to appropriate their message for propaganda purposes; at the same time, Polish institutions cooperated with British crews, supplied materials and took part in productions that generated foreign-currency revenue. Some films reached Poland through official channels, while others circulated unofficially in the 'second circulation' (alongside the spontaneously developing VHS market) or within closed institutional circles. The presence of Solidarity on British screens thus emerges both as a record of Poland's historic turning point and as evidence of a culture which, in seeking to understand it, also invested it with meanings of its own.